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LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATES REGARDING
THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF ENGAGEMENT AND THEIR STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE
ACADEMIC SUCCESS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Education

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Education

By

Gulcan Tokluoglu

August 2020

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Gulcan Tokluoglu

2020

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ABSTRACT

LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATES REGARDING THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF ENGAGEMENT AND THEIR STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE ACADEMIC SUCCESS

By

Gulcan Tokluoglu

June 2020

Dissertation supervised by Rick McCown, Ph.D.

While international students greatly influence globalization with their diverse cultural backgrounds, they often encounter issues when adapting to a new academic, social, and cultural setting. The goal of this research question was twofold in nature in that it sought to not only explore the adjustment experiences of participants but also be able to see what resources and practices were found helpful and needed to be expanded upon in order to provide ways of redressing inequitable practices and contributing to pedagogical change to promote engagement and success of international undergraduate students. A thorough analysis of in-depth interviews considered both upstream and downstream elements of the new lives of six international undergraduate students from various regions of the world attending a mid-sized private university in Western Pennsylvania. The study found that participants had challenges in communicating the English language, academic and sociocultural issues, and career

development. Furthermore, multiple factors such as a better educational experience, higher levels of engagement in cross-cultural interactions, and more career options played an important role for study abroad decision making. Lastly, they favored certain on-campus resources including diverse staff members that communicate cross-culturally during programs offered throughout the year and professional guidance regarding academic and student affairs. The study recommended that there is likely significant benefits in further studying the way social life gets done by international undergraduate students as the authorities on the experience and examining the strategies undertaken by them to process their learning and academic success. This could also allow a powerful reflection back to educators and administrators and helps them to understand what actually works and what does not work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my advisor, Rick McCown Ph.D., for guiding and supporting me over the years. You have set an example of excellence as a researcher and instructor.

I would like to thank my thesis committee members Dr. Lisa López Levers, Dr. Deborah Scigliano, and Dr. Connie Moss for all of their guidance through this process; your ideas and feedback have been absolutely invaluable.

I would like to thank my classmates, collaborators, and the multitude of undergraduate students who contributed to this research. I am very grateful to all of you.

I would like to thank my mentor, James Doyle, Ed.D., for his constant enthusiasm and encouragement.

I would also like to thank my Pittsburgh family: Camara Rob, Patrick Williams, Zarin Hamid, Shaira Amin, Dr. Dara Ware Allen, Kathryn Vargas, Stephanie Lewis, Melanie Claxton, Metin Keskin, and Janet Stanley. Your support and constant encouragement have kept me smiling and inspired. You are and always will be my family.

I would especially like to thank my amazing family for the love, support, trust, sacrifice, honesty, respect, and constant motivation I have gotten over the years. In particular, I would like to thank my parents, my sisters, and my brothers-in-law. I undoubtedly could not have done this without you.

Finally, I would like to thank and dedicate this thesis to my father, Cemal Tokluoglu. It was you who originally generated my love for education derived from visits to your workplace. Although it has been years since you have passed, I still take you and your lessons with me to everywhere and every day.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Without a doubt, moving abroad and starting over in a new country could be a terrifying yet exhilarating adventure for students. Challenges increase for these students as they often experience adjustment problems given the language barrier, as well as changing cultural and social norms and different teaching methods. Those challenges affect their academic involvement, social integration, and cultural adaptation in many ways that consequently cause them to feel uncomfortable and even invisible on campus, especially when engaging with a group of people in social and learning activities.

Enhancing the quality of the international student experience is crucial for various reasons: They bring cultural enrichment to and promote global understanding in classrooms as well as contribute billion dollars to the U.S. economy in tuition and expenditures for living expenses every year. To get a better sense of the struggles those students face, McLachlan and Justice (2009) highlighted the importance of early assessment of international student health and outreach, especially during the first 6-12 months of living in the U.S. Moreover, engaging students in intercultural communication and social events benefit their adjustment. Physical activities as a social approach can be used to facilitate bicultural social interactions that also contribute to the academic, cultural, social, and psychological adjustments of international students. To encourage international students to interact with domestic students, Li and Zizzi (2018) suggested creating student activities sponsored by universities for both sets of students to have more exposure to cultural diversity.

It is a crucial factor for institutions to fully integrate international students into the learning process and social environment to be able to stay attractive in the global student market. As the researchers, Zhou and Cole (2017), clearly stated in their article, institutions must provide

educational experiences and outcomes to new-comers that are not limited to and comparable with domestic students to pinpoint strengths and areas for improvement, such as providing supports and opportunities through racial awareness workshops, courses in academic writing and advanced communication skills, and office hours with faculty members either in-person or online. Moreover, institutions must also remove the challenges hindering the achievement of students' professional goals and preventing them from forming deep, meaningful connections with other international and domestic students. Further recommendations, such as equal access to participation in on-campus employment, career-related training, and conversations on the environmental factors, were provided by Urban and Palmer (2016) to assist students to build positive relationships.

Relatedness that refers to the establishment of belongingness and connectedness to a group must be satisfied as it contributes to the overall psychological growth of an individual and serves to acknowledge students' backgrounds. Providing spaces where students engage in place-making activities such as a shared kitchen, a lounge area with food, drinks, and photographs of current students and faculties, and tours of the local community are critical for the well-being and positive experience of international students. Terrazas-Carrillo, Hong, McWhirter, Robbins, and Pace (2017) also have stated the importance of place-making by providing a place for religious activities, offering information about campus and community resources, and fulfilling specific needs like leisure activities in nature, which present opportunities for international students to establish connections to places. Additionally, international students want to feel safe, supported, engaged, and helpfully challenged by their instructors to build self-confidence (Ryan & Deci, 200a). If instructors do not know much about the struggles of their students, teachers may tend to rely on their own experiences for teaching, which is not made for these students.

While international undergraduate students greatly influence globalization with their diverse cultural backgrounds and gain a variety of benefits in obtaining a U.S. higher education degree, they, as a minority in a host country, often encounter issues that cannot be underestimated when adapting to a new culture (Mahmood & Burke, 2018). These issues mostly revolve around a lack of knowledge about American culture along with changes in food, weather, and housing conditions that exacerbate acculturative stress. Thus, it will be very beneficial to be able to see the different factors through further research on generational differences and perceptions on the racial diversification because cultural challenges have a great impact on people's behaviors, attitudes, and emotions.

Another element considered to be primary in the determination of student experience is providing educational opportunities through courses, seminars, training, and workshops at campus units to inform students about work authorization options. Those students sometimes experience moderate to severe anxiety and demonstrate impaired functioning closer to their graduation. There are two main reasons for that: inadequate training on employment opportunities and career advice to help students refine their skills and attributes; and limited knowledge of employers about cultural differences and visa requirements. In their article, *Working with International Students in the U.S. and Beyond*, the authors called the involved employers, researchers, students, and practitioners to engage in acquiring knowledge about work authorization options, removing certain impacts of cultural differences on job search, and promoting specialized career services for international students with the aim of removing the barriers, improving the quality of higher education, and serving them better (Balin, Anderson, Chudasama, Kanagasingam & Zhang, 2016).

Moreover, individuals are concerned about the increasing amount of student loan debt that they obtain to pursue their academic goals. This concern is also increasing with the understanding among students that the bar of entry into the workforce is becoming higher, and the expectation of being hired straight away is very low in the home and host country. Such worries usually cause a lack of sleep, poor diet, and stress, which may result in mental health problems. These and many more uncertainties affect the interpretations of international students' initial interaction, experience of international living, and overall satisfaction in a negative way (Loo, Luo, Ye, & WES, 2017).

The U.S. is the home to some of the best higher education institutions in the world, attracting international students to study in the country and giving students a chance to study with some of the world's greatest minds, researchers, business leaders, technologists, philanthropists, innovators, and become the change-makers of tomorrow. According to the evaluation company, Spantran, (2015), STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) majors are the most sought out, due to high career demand for STEM-educated students worldwide. In addition to STEM, business and social sciences are the other popular majors among international students. In fact, the business leading fields of study draw a great number of students and made up about 20.9 percent of study abroad students in 2017 ("Open Doors 2017 Executive Summary"). Supporting these students and teaching them to be critical beings in all aspects of life is important that deserves close attention. Therefore, the inquiry in this research is concerned with exploring experiences of international students completely and thoroughly from participants' perspectives as they integrate themselves into a new academic and social setting while navigating the cultural transition process. Additionally, the information gained by examining their experiences together will help to understand internal (financial,

psychological, motivational, and emotional) and external (academic, socio-cultural, and career development) influences to facilitate better adjustment and acculturation practices. The investigation may also offer additional information to prepare future generations of incoming international undergraduate students for better academic involvement and social integration.

Statement of the Problem

As international students lose the advantages of being a member of the majority group in the host country, these individuals often experience a sense of dislocation. This leaves them with an adjustment process to acquire a new status and become accustomed to the new world. They are required to adapt to an unfamiliar culture, language, social values, cultural traditions, living circumstances, financial problems, and learning styles, for the first time in their early adulthood.

A wide range of personal and practical adjustments on and off-campus is indisputable. Those are born from a broad range of challenges including the followings: academic and social factors influencing learning process (Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Bird, 2017; Hsu & Huang, 2017; Bhowmik and Kim, 2018); new social and cultural norms (Hanassah, 2006; Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012; Burkhardt & Bennett, 2015; Ritter, 2016); class participation and unfamiliar learning approach (Chue & Nie, 2016; Kim, Ates, Grigsby, Kraker, & Micek, 2016; Palmer, 2016); international communication competence (Lee, 2016; Wang, Ahn, Kim, & Siegler, 2017); limited employment opportunities (Sangganjanavanich, Lenz, & Cavazos, 2011); and racial stereotypes, stress, sociocultural adjustment, friendship development (Mahmood & Burke, 2018; Rienties et al., 2012; Ritter, 2016).

Other challenges sometimes occur due to inaccurate perceptions of university life and differing expectations of students from different geographical regions. This is mainly because universities commonly think of international students as a homogenous group whose personal

and educational backgrounds are very similar to each other (Dalglish, 2005; Omar, Mahone, Ngobia, & FitzSimons, 2016). In reality, international students may not be familiar with the processes used to facilitate learning as these students are accustomed to the educational practices of their own countries. Additionally, students even from the same regions of the world may have different expectations prior to arrival in the U.S. as their experiences comprise an intersection of various aspects. When dissimilarities between the culture of an individual and the new culture are greater in size, the disappointment of students in the host country may be inevitable (Yang & Clum, 1994). Therefore, it is important to understand the variations in international students' experiences to avoid overgeneralizing (Heng, 2019).

Hence, an appropriate starting point in the study was to examine multiple aspects of their experiences of migration. Exploring the issues faced by international undergraduate students during their time at a private university in Western Pennsylvania qualitatively from participants' perspectives revealed their lived realities along with their new academic, social, and cultural self-perceptions in the host country. Then, the study focused on the effective methods that participants of this study found useful to provide ways of redressing inequitable practices and contributing to pedagogical change to promote engagement and success of international undergraduate students.

Purpose of the Study

International students experience personal and professional growth while emotional, psychological, and intellectual challenges are faced during their time in a foreign country. Thus far, their acculturation experiences and academic challenges have mostly been evaluated to standardize and conceptualize the procedure and support. However, the literature is replete with

generalized studies on international students and their challenges, considering them as homogenous groups of individuals.

This study specifically focuses on the individual experiences of international undergraduate students attending a mid-sized private university in Western Pennsylvania. A thorough analysis considers both upstream and downstream elements of their new lives including decision influences, challenges, goals, and impacts. The investigation also offers additional insight into the assimilation and integration of future generations of international undergraduate students for better academic involvement and social integration. Moreover, the inquiry reveals the nature of the barriers to studying overseas, risk factors that exist in the environment, and protective factors that serve to mitigate these risk factors. As a way of conceptualizing the data, related literature was reviewed to understand the experiences, challenges, and perceptions of those students regarding their academic involvement, social integration, and acculturation process. Moreover, qualitative analysis was used to identify common themes that emerge from individual interviews.

Research Question

The following question framed the research:

- What are the academic, social, and cultural obstacles and resources of participants attending a mid-sized private university in Western Pennsylvania?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The study is associated with Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement that is defined as the amount of physical and psychological energy that students devote to the academic involvement and social integration. In addition to the student involvement theory, the study is

also connected to Kettle's (2017) student engagement approach defined as "a productive way of investigating international students' efforts to mediate institutional expectations through their actions and interactions, driven by goals of appropriation and enactment, and larger professional and personal motivations" (p. 13).

Student involvement theory assisted to analyze the causes and consequences of background effects and identify the contributions to the overall experience of students. The theory helped explore the three key areas: (a) *inputs* that are students' demographics and background information, and any previous experiences; (b) *environment* that accounts for all of the experiences students have during their study; and (c) *outcomes* that include students' characteristics, overall experiences, and values that exist after a student has graduated from school (Astin, 1999). The Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O) framework was used to the literature review related to international undergraduate students' experience, expectations, and factors affecting overall acculturation experience, as well as their academic involvement and social integration in building the conceptual framework. During the data collection and analysis process, this theory was particularly important to understand students' academic involvement and social integration on campus and the barriers imposed by students themselves and the institution. Additionally, it created opportunities to assess universities' consideration in terms of seeking international student input to enhance services and programs. Furthermore, the results contributed to the knowledge base for educators and administrators who are involved in the process of acculturation of these students. If implemented, the results of this inquiry may help to clarify how international undergraduate students can be supported to be more resilient and academically successful.

A student-centered approach to international student engagement by Kettle (2017), as mentioned, also assisted the study. By focusing on effective methods and utilizing a social practice conceptual model Kettle hopes to enable students to engage in meaningful and rewarding academic and social experiences. In other words, by drawing engagement together with social practice she believes that new understandings can be created about the elements that students recognize as salient in a new country and the actions that they take in response. Therefore, students are considered as the arbiters of the international experience with the authoritative voice on what matters instead of positioning the students as subjects to dominant power-relations. She states three elements that form the actions, knowledge, and experiences associated with engagement: (a) *antecedents* that are academic practices and the mediating role of teaching in generating learning, participation, and legitimacy; (b) *actions* that are behaviors, cognitions, and emotions undertaken by students to process their learning and academic success; and (c) *achievements* that are outcomes that derive from the actions of engaging. This approach was helpful to investigate, as Kettle (2017) recommended, ‘*good practice*’ to identify what study participants regarded as effective teaching for learning to provide ways of redressing inequitable practice. Therefore, useful practices were found to contribute to pedagogical change to promote engagement and participation of international students.

To summarize, Astin’s theory assisted to examine relationships between input characteristics and learning environments while Kettle’s approach enabled insights into students’ favored practices and their actions in response; thereafter they influenced the attainment of academic and personal goals. Thus, the study revealed a deeper understanding of experiences of international undergraduate students attending a mid-sized private university in Western Pennsylvania while providing additional insight into assimilation and integration of future

generations of international undergraduate students for better academic involvement and social integration.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this current study has been reflected in the growing number of international students enrolling at universities in the U.S. every year. While there were roughly 583,000 international students at U.S. colleges and universities in 2006-2007, the number has gone up every year since, and the country hosted more than one million students in 2015-2016, according to data from IIE (2017). In other words, the overall number of international students in the U.S. has grown nearly 85 % over the last decade ("Open Doors Fast Facts", 2017). While the benefits international students bring their universities - financial contribution (\$39 billion was brought to the country in 2016 through spending on tuition, room and board, and living expenses), and the intellectual and cultural environment enhancement for domestic students - are clear, an in-depth study on their well-being and satisfaction is imperative to give voice to and effectively support them.

Thus far, acculturation experiences and academic challenges have mostly been evaluated to standardize and conceptualize the procedure and support. However, it is important to have profound insight into or deep understanding of the experiences of international students. Examining the phenomenon through a qualitative inquiry highlighted both the uniqueness and the commonalities in experiences of incorporating new cultural identities formed through the accumulation, integration, and interpretations of the realities of daily life to assist with creating better international student experience. Astin's (1984) theory of student engagement assisted the study to consider different elements (Input, Environment, and Outcomes) to see the full picture. These elements assisted understanding of the relationship among backgrounds, educational

practices, and outcomes. Furthermore, Kettle's (2017) student-centered approach provided opportunities to understand the way social life gets done by international students as the authorities on the experience within the prevailing social conditions and examine the strategies undertaken by them to process their learning and academic success. This allowed the researcher to understand what actually worked and what did not work for the participants.

Definitions of Terms

International Undergraduate Students - Individuals enrolled in higher education institutions on a temporary visa in a country other than their home country of citizenship or permanent residence. The term students and international undergraduate students are used interchangeably in this study to refer to full-time undergraduate students.

Acculturation – The process of adapting to a new culture, which includes “cultural and psychological change that takes place between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (Berry, 2005, p.698).

Summary

This chapter introduced a study that intended to explore the perceptions of international undergraduate students to deepen understanding of the factors impacting outcomes of educational experiences. This study specifically focused on the individual experiences of international undergraduate students attending a mid-sized private university in Western Pennsylvania. In-depth interviews were conducted and covered topics such as the respondent's life prior to immigration, actual experiences in their academic program and campus life, academic and cultural adaptation, and individual goals at a private university. The investigation offered additional insight into the assimilation and integration of future generations of international undergraduate students for better academic involvement and social integration.

Chapter 2 delivers a comprehensive discussion of the theoretical framework for the inquiry. Furthermore, the chapter provides an in-depth review of the literature on international undergraduate students in the U.S., including their characteristics, expectations, as well as struggles. Chapter 3 presents a description of the methodological framework and research design for the study in extensive detail with the processes of data collection and analysis.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

This study sought to have profound insight into or deep understanding of experiences of international undergraduate students from their individual perspectives about integrating into a new academic and social setting while navigating the cultural, social, and academic transition process in the U.S. It was important to focus on individual experiences of students since universities commonly think of international students as a homogenous group whose personal and educational backgrounds are very similar to each other and do not recognize the individual characteristics of international students (Evivie, 2009; Dalglish, 2005; Welikala, 2015; Heng, 2019). Therefore, many international students are likely to sense that they are not understood or seen as individuals.

As international students lose the advantages of being a member of the majority group in the host country, these individuals often experience a sense of dislocation. This leaves them with an adjustment process to acquire a new status and become accustomed to the new world. They are required to adapt to an unfamiliar culture, language, social values, living circumstances, financial setting, and learning styles, for the first time in their early adulthood. Hence, an appropriate starting point to set the context for this study was to provide a background information on the topic, cover research studies conducted on the challenges faced by international students and the benefits associated with them. This was followed by a review of the literature that examines multiple aspects of their experiences of migration. Exploring the issues faced by international undergraduate students during their time at a private university in Western Pennsylvania through the lens of Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O)

theory highlighted both the uniqueness and the commonalities in experiences among these students on their perceptions of the academic and campus environment.

The literature reviewed in this chapter is guided by the following research question:

- What are the academic, social, and cultural obstacles and resources of participants attending a mid-sized private university in Western Pennsylvania?

Background

With more than 43.7 million immigrants residing in the U.S. and accounting for 13.5 % of the total U.S. population of 323.1 million in 2016, the country has more immigrants than any other country in the world (Migration Policy Institute, 2018). The composition of those classified as immigrants is very diverse in terms of race, class, and culture and represents nearly all countries in the world. Many of these migrants are international students as the U.S. has been the top educational destination for international student migrants since at least 1960, hosting about 1.1 million of the 4.6 million students enrolled worldwide in 2017 (Zong & Batalova, 2018).

For the third year in a row the highest number of students coming to study at universities in the U.S. are from India and China - the top two of the world's fastest emerging and developing economies offering great opportunities and leading to the emergence of a strong and growing group of entrepreneurs (IIE, 2017). China was the top origin country, representing 33 percent of the total international students in the country, followed by India (17 percent) and Saudi Arabia and South Korea (5 percent each) closely tied for third place in the U.S. in 2016 and 2017 (Zong & Batalova, 2018). STEM, business, social sciences, foreign languages and international studies were among the top five fields of study in 2017 and 2018 (IIE, 2017). While over 65 percent of all international students (undergraduate and graduate) were funded by personal or family funds,

82.3 percent of 442,746 international undergraduate students were self-funded in the 2017-2018 academic year. Only 8.1 percent of all undergraduate international students were funded by U.S. college or universities (IIE, 2018). The report also indicates that there were more undergraduate (442,746) than graduate (382,953) international students in 2018 (IIE, 2018). Because the U.S. long has been known for its diversity and considered as the land of opportunities, an increasing number of students have been trying to take advantage of unique offerings at universities in the U.S. for long-term goals (Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut, & Klute, 2012; Aldawsari, Adams, Grimes, and Kohn; 2018).

Benefits and responsibilities of hosting international students are to be recognized. To start with, there is a direct financial impact of international students on the host country through tuitions and other expenses during their studies. According to the 2017 Open Doors Report on *International Educational Exchange* data released by IIE and the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, in 2016 international students brought \$39 billion to the U.S. economy through their spending on tuition, room and board, and living expenses. Looking solely at the financial benefits of international students would be an undervaluation to the benefits of having those students in the country: An increased international presence represents a sign of diversity and cultural exposure for domestic students, which generally is considered to have very positive impacts on institutions in a highly globalized world and beneficial effects on academic performance.

The responsibilities of the host university to these students include not only providing high-quality instruction but also qualified staff, university employment opportunities, and a safe experience. However, results for many studies indicated that U.S. colleges fail to reach international students' expectations and to assess objectively the factors affecting their

satisfaction (Bista & Foster, 2011; Dalglish, 2005; Welikala, 2015). According to these studies, the gap between students' expectations based on the promises that institutions make and the reality of the experience once they arrive on the campus is increasing. Additionally, there is a danger in overselling the qualities and opportunities of a university to prospective international undergraduate students, including job placements, flexible modes of study, world-class research, and a cutting-edge experience (OECD, 2002).

These students aim to receive a better quality of higher education, the notion of higher quality being relative to that of their home country. They also hope that an international education will improve their career prospects and English language skills as well as help them to obtain different perspectives, develop personally, and build intercultural relationships (Obst & Forster, 2007). Although those students face unique challenges that are uncommon among local students, quality of education, distinctive curriculum, mix of cultures (diversity), employment prospects in both host and home countries, and endless opportunities to improve their English skills in and outside of a classroom seem to predominate over them (Ward, 2001; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005; Jiang, 2018; Bastien, Seifen-Adkins, & Johnson, 2018).

Benefits of Studying in the U.S.A.

One of the main reasons why students choose to study in the U.S. is the country's reputation for quality education and unique curriculum. The education in the U.S. goes beyond the textbooks and engages students in the problems of today's society through student-led discussions, small-group work, and individual projects detailing the skills and knowledge students are expected to master in each classroom. Additionally, instructors provide constant feedback to further challenge students for their own learning (Rao, 2017). Moreover, many renowned universities offer a broad range of choices and a great deal of freedom to students to

set their own academic path for the future. Lee, during an interview with Kim (2015) stated that, “there are a lot of education options here...my country does not have this much educational diversity.” Furthermore, schools in the U.S often do not only prepare students academically but also provide them with a blend of technical and conceptual training alongside hands-on experience for future career success. Specialized libraries, conferences, and training programs are available throughout the year to offer students a multitude of resources in their field (Kim, 2015). Furthermore, universities in the U.S place great significance on diverse student body and emphasize its meaning in classes as diversity and inclusion has led to more innovation and better opportunities for all. In this respect, schools are trying to fulfill this mission of diversity and inclusion by increasing the number of students of all races, ages, religions, and countries of origin. This gives both international and domestic students a chance to be in “a stimulating and rich learning environment which encourages cross-cultural understanding and networking (“Why Study in the US,” 2016). On top of everything, English-language education is considered to be a great possible way to be ready for the increasingly global, competitive and high-tech economy of the future when pursuing better career opportunities. Although many colleges provide English as a second language (ESL) classes and study groups to help students actively communicate in and outside of their classrooms (Andrade, 2006; Wang, Harrison, Cardullo, & Lin, 2018), studies suggest that language courses should be offered at a lower cost along with events such as cook-outs, field trips, coffee shop meetings and peer-matching programs for international students to further improve their conversational skills and increase student success (Wang, Harrison, Cardullo, & Lin, 2018; Zhao, 2013). Therefore, students can develop their linguistic and communication skills to become more desirable to future prospective employees (Nunes & Arthur, 2013).

International students are heavily driven to study in U.S. to also improve employment prospects. Regardless of where they come from, their hope is to have a competitive advantage in today's world after graduation (Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). Although schools have a limited number of assistantship positions available each year, these positions pay a periodic fixed sum called a stipend and offer discounted tuition and/or student housing. In addition to financial benefits, these assistantships give students a chance to gain valuable work and theory-to-practice experience (Hephner-LaBanc, 2010). Furthermore, curricular practical training (CPT), defined as employment offered by sponsoring employers in schools is an “integral part of the schools’ established curriculum” (“F-1 Curricular Practical Training”, 2018). These opportunities such as cooperative education, internships and work/study programs give students practical experience to hone what they learn in class, which becomes tremendously invaluable when interviewing for a job upon graduation.

Challenges of Studying in the U.S.A.

The personal and academic goals of international students may get disturbed with daily struggles while adjusting to a new life and culture. Frankly, the idea of earning a degree abroad may not be for everyone as it comes with many difficulties. Students must be prepared to immerse themselves in the customs of unfamiliar habitats far from home. It requires endeavor, and an earnest and conscientious mindset to accomplish academic goals while keeping up with others, including local students, in an environment of uncertainties that may create anxiety and stress for international students (Hanassah, 2006; Smith and Khawaja, 2011; Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012). Adapting an academically, culturally, and socially different educational system, where grading procedures, instructions, and interactions are dissimilar to what is known, can create challenges for students (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2014;

Alghamdi & Otte, 2016). In addition to the differences in learning approaches and class manners, their academic performance is also challenged by their lack of English language skills. Not only the language itself, but their accents can create an additional difficulty for local people to understand these students (Wang, Ahn, Kim, and Lin-Siegler, 2017). Research has shown that individuals with underdeveloped language skills do not only have a limited ability to convey their thoughts and feelings, but they also lack ability to complete tasks for academic success (Owen, 2008; Kim, 2011).

The new learning environment can also be stressful for students due to differences between local culture and international students' ethnicity. The acculturation process that individuals undergo in response to the change in cultural contexts can create conflict and frustration (Hanassah, 2006). Familiarity with U.S. culture makes this process smoother, which is why those who work with international students should focus on the student's personal experiences along with background characteristics rather than putting the majority of effort into standardizing and conceptualizing the procedure and support. Lee's (2007) study revealed that it was easier for students from Canada and Europe to adjust to U.S. culture than it was for students from the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, East Asia, and India. Lee identified students from these countries as those who faced discrimination. For the well-being of international students, receiving support through social involvement is of high importance. However, it is difficult for faculty and staff members as well as peers to understand students from different parts of the world without proper knowledge of multiculturalism and preparation in cultural awareness and sensitivity (Palmer, 2016).

In addition to cultural differences, changes in gender role expectations and social norms may be difficult for some international students to understand. More specifically, gender roles in

the U.S. could be very different from the norms that govern women's roles and traditional obligations in the home country of female students. International female students are more likely to be at the risk of facing heightened challenges in adjusting to the culture in the U.S. as they are more likely to feel homesick and lonely than male students (Lee, Park, & Kim, 2009). Negative perceptions and gender stereotypes held by some local students make it harder for these students to adapt properly to their new environment (Contreras-Aguirre & Gonzalez, 2017). Clearly, unfamiliar gender roles and expectations may limit international students' in general and specifically female international students' perceptions about what is achievable and expected from them, which might limit their potential of fully adjusting to the host culture, achieving the predetermined goals, and investing in cultural diversity (Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008).

Challenges are furthered with strict work restrictions interfering with the chance of earning work experience in the host country: Student visas (F-1) are mainly intended to enable international students to study in the U.S. In addition to that, employers generally are reluctant and unwilling to hire individuals due to their cost to the company and unfamiliarity with the culture and work ethics (Huang & Turner, 2018). Without proper work experience those students may have little chance of getting a job not only in the host country but also in the home country as well. Managing director Martin Birchall at High Fliers Research told The Huffington Post that work experience is now just as important as a degree: "New graduates who have not had any work experience at all during their studies are increasingly unlikely to be offered a good graduate job after university" (Sherriff, 2013). Thus, universities are encouraged to support these students by creating employment opportunities and even offering awards that can be used to pay for college or repay existing student loans (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). This could certainly assist international students in solving some of their financial issues as the financial course of action

becomes extremely stressful for them to finance for their education (Telbis, Helgeson, Kingsbury, & Dakota, 2014).

The sections above have provided a brief overview of the benefits of international education on several levels as well as the challenges that students may encounter during their time in the U.S. These benefits and challenges of pursuing a higher education degree will be explained in detail in the following sections.

An Overview of Four-Year Undergraduate Education in the U.S.

Over 2,500 colleges and universities across the U.S. offer four-year programs in which over one million students earn a bachelor's degree in many different fields of study. These four years spent as an undergraduate at a university are known as the freshman, sophomore, junior and senior years. Bachelor of Arts degrees (B.A.) and Bachelor of Science degrees (B.S.) are two typical types of degrees offered in the U.S. While B.A. degrees introduces subjects in the arts, such as social sciences, humanities or fine arts, students earning a B.S. degree take majority of their courses in life, physical or mathematical sciences. Regardless of their types of degrees, students are required to begin with studying courses from a range of subjects to form a broad educational foundation such as, English composition, social sciences, history, mathematics and physical sciences to meet the core curriculum requirements. Once students meet the core curriculum requirements, then they are asked to choose a specific field of study in an academic area that is of great interest to them. Therefore, students can be equipped with the skills and knowledge for their professional field (Hampshire, 2008, "Undergraduate Education System", 2019).

Although some colleges and universities divide the academic year into three trimesters of 10-12 weeks (fall, spring and summer), most of them offer sessions a year of around 16 weeks

each: fall which goes from September to late December and spring, which extends from late January to late May. Students per academic year are generally required to complete ten courses or around 30 credits. They also find ways to encourage campus involvement through a wide variety of activities including fields trip to different companies, guest speakers, trade shows, and seminars usually organized by the students' union or council as it is as important as academic involvement (Hampshire, 2008).

It is important to know that entry qualifications for American colleges and universities vary considerably. However, having a thorough knowledge of English is a requirement by all and therefore those whose first language is not English must usually take a TOEFL test (Test of English as a Foreign Language). Some colleges and universities also require all foreign students to take the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test). In addition to differences in entry qualifications, private colleges and universities (around \$35,000 per year) tend to be more expensive than public colleges and universities (around \$10,000 per year). Furthermore, out-of-state residents pay more tuition costs because they do not pay taxes to the state in which the university is located (Hampshire, 2008).

This section provided a general overview of four-year undergraduate education in the U.S. The next sections will specifically focus on the characteristics of international undergraduate students and reasons behind the selection of undergraduate international students.

Characteristics of International Students

Overall satisfaction of international students depends on several factors: language familiarity, gender differences, financial stability, academic involvement, social integration, and job accessibility. From an academic and external relations standpoint, understating the factors benefiting international undergraduate students in the short run as well as long term will affect

their overall experience. That is because their level of satisfaction can only be increased if those students are thought of as a complex puzzle that needs all of its pieces in order to reveal the complete picture.

Various studies revealed that expectations of students are not consistent with what they experience once they enter institutions, thus making transition difficult. Bista and Foster (2011), for example, conducted a study on the individual needs, academic issues and first experiences of six international undergraduate and graduate students at a southern university in the U.S. The students in the study were from Africa, China, India, Japan, Jordan, and Nepal. Using videotaped group interviews, the researchers found that universities try to do their best in welcoming international students; however, their efforts often fail due to lack of a dedicated procedure to evaluate support systems such as counseling and advising, updates on visa, and part time employments for international students (Bista & Foster, 2011). The researchers also suggested that international students must be given more additional and accurate information on housing, college fees, social groups, flights, and the specific city before their arrivals. What's more, the researchers encouraged colleges to make their rules and regulations clearer for these students. More specifically, colleges should focus on the importance of providing information in advance on immigration policies regarding full time and part time course work, English language requirements, on and off campus employment. In addition, they encourage colleges to provide explanations of college terminology such as grades, transfers, and assignments as educational systems and practices are likely to be different in other countries. Additionally, their research examined the importance of having access to public transportation or shuttle services for students to be able to explore activities in the local communities such as theaters, shopping centers, lakes and parks. These areas of suggested focus may reduce the risk of students feeling bored and

lonely that could lead them to eventually transfer to another college or university (Bista & Foster, 2011). Moreover, many international students are concerned about the lack of financial support they receive from their families to pay for their university experience, which sometimes forces them to disregard the federal laws and find work even though working without authorization is considered a violation of their immigration status in the U.S. The researchers recommended colleges in the U.S. to work to provide alternatives to illegal employment — a condition that is more common among international undergraduate students as graduate assistantships are not available for them.

Common Perception: Homogenous Groups of Individuals

The challenges associated with international students sometimes occur due to inaccurate perceptions of university life and differing expectations of students from different geographical regions. This occurs because universities commonly think of international students as a homogenous group whose personal and educational backgrounds are very similar to each other. When Dalglish (2005) conducted a study through informal focus groups with 38 international undergraduate and graduate students within the Faculty of Business at a university in Australia to discuss their expectations and the nature of the reality of their study, the research reported the importance of providing an effective learning experience for all international students. According to the responses of the study's participants from various regions, including Africa, Thailand, India, China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, important factors impacting student experience were revealed along with several implications. The researcher strongly highlighted the importance of acknowledging the different backgrounds and experiences of international students in expectations. This finding raises challenges for teachers faced with classes made up of a combination of diverse domestic and diverse international students. Additionally, international

students may not be familiar with the processes used to facilitate learning as these students are accustomed to the educational practices of their own countries. The results of this study also revealed that students from different regions of the world had different expectations prior to arrival in the U.S. For example, while Thai students were more interested in social interaction options on campus, Indian students mostly focused on the differences in teaching style between the host and home country. Their experiences were also different upon arrival as Thai students felt the lack of individual faculty attention and Chinese students struggled with pressure during examinations, which showed that students even from the same region may have different expectations and go through different challenging experiences based on their backgrounds. On the other hand, all participants shared the same concerns regarding access to opportunities to meet domestic students and the lack of multicultural environment and insufficient opportunities to network with other international students. The main suggestion given in the study was around internationalizing the curriculum that is taught at this specific university to “enable them to place their learning in the context of international business and be aware of the impact of globalization and cross-cultural issues on business practices” (Dalglish, 2005, p. 7). The researcher also indicated that intercultural interaction should be encouraged continuously by “recognizing the differences in learning style and previous education experience, providing bridging programs, and enabling staff to provide the interaction that many students are seeking” (Dalglish, 2005, p. 7). Her study is in agreement with a previous study on the consensual and individual stereotypic beliefs about international students among American host nationals. Using a multicomponent, free-response methodology with 100 American college students, Spencer-Rodger (2001) found that the extreme heterogeneity and differentiation of the international students did not make any difference as they were regarded as a fairly homogenous outgroup by the participants. Some

negative attributes were consistently ascribed to international students which was strongly related to prejudicial attitudes and social avoidance of the group.

Another study on the challenges faced by African international students at a metropolitan research university located in the southeastern region of the U.S. by Evivie (2009) supported the same claim: "... international students are not a homogenous group. International students from Europe, Canada, and Latin America have comparatively less difficulties adapting in the United States than students from Asia and Africa, who come from very different cultures" (p. 14). After interviewing in-depth with six students from Western Sub-Saharan Africa and asking questions about challenges faced, support systems, plans to return to country of origin, expectations, and family and friends' perception of the U.S., the researcher came to the conclusion that racial discrimination and stereotypes were difficult for these students as they came from racially homogenous countries and became ethnic minorities in the U.S. In other words, Black African students have often grown up in racially homogenous societies, therefore, discrimination based on race is unlikely. However, their ease of cultural adjustment is affected on arrival in the U.S. that has been predominantly White. Considering specific challenges faced by students of different nations, genders, age groups, and majors, the researcher suggested schools to see students as individuals beings to make culturally sensitive adaptations to their support systems to mitigate their challenges.

Welikala (2015), a lecturer in higher education at King's College London, supported the same claims by stating that "new strategies need to be developed to address actual difficulties that hinder students' success in education." According to him, even though universities support international students to mix with domestic students, teach them to be critical beings in classrooms, and encourage them to use academic English; they still hold on to some misleading

assumptions and counterproductive narratives. Based on the complaints received by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator from international students in 2014, Welikala suggested that the system of creating homogeneous curricula is failing because universities do not recognize the individual characteristics of international students. Therefore, he believes that universities must change their perceptions about how students learn and why they are here. Research in later years around international student experience agreed to assume these students as a homogeneous group risking overgeneralization of internationals (Hanassah, 2006; Lee, 2014). A study on the relationships, experience, and challenges of international graduate students (IGS) and their faculty advisors at the University of Guelph, highlighted the diversity of students, noted that “Each student experiences his/her new environment differently. While much of the literature implies that international students are homogeneous because of their culture...” (Omar, Mahone, Ngobia, & FitzSimons, 2016, p. 13 & 14). Collecting data through focus group discussions, semi-structured face-to-face interviews and online surveys from a total of 147 faculty advisors and 72 IGS from 23 countries and analyzing manually using a coding strategy, the study indicated that each student was different, therefore, a majority of the staff and faculty participants had encountered different challenges with different students. A statement of one faculty participant, “Every case is different depending on personalities; you can never treat international graduate students as homogenous, treat them as individuals and recognize that every country and every individual has different set of cultures and values” was confirmed by a staff member who expressed that “It is important not to see international graduate students as a homogeneous group, but rather as individuals from varying cultures with different challenges, and develop strategies and provide supports that suit individual needs” (p. 7).

It is important to understand that international students present unique background characteristics and are not homogeneous groups of individuals. A more recent study by Heng (2019) examined the heterogeneity of 18 Chinese international students in their first or second years through a qualitative case study despite the reification of them as either homogeneous or clustered along nationality. They were mostly engineering, mathematics, and business-related students, on student visas, in three private, 4-year research universities in an east coast metropolitan city. Semi-structured interviews were conducted thrice: at the start, middle, and end of their academic year after participants completed a questionnaire that collected personal information to frame their experiences. Findings revealed that participants' communication in the foreign language, engagement with classmates, participation in extracurricular activities, and preparation for the future vary by year of study, field of study, and, to a small extent, gender. More specifically, Chinese internationals in the study reported difficulties with writing and speaking in English, especially during their first year as they were more used to narrative essays in China and unable to catch up with the responses of native speakers to issues. They seemed optimistic about improving their language skills with time stating that "it's especially hard in the beginning but a lot better now" (p. 614). Furthermore, participants' engagement with subject content depended on their field of study; for example, students expected to undertake humanities or social science modules to fulfill their major requirement talked about challenges around unfamiliar sociocultural context and different content matter while business students struggled with recognizing popular U.S. companies which professors referenced and learning law vocabulary and ideas. Their stress levels also increased when domestic students were familiar with subject content. Moreover, second years were very active in preparing for their future and worried about finding internships, long-term job prospects, and post-graduation plans. Contrary

to the second years, first years were mostly concerned about the declaration of their majors. Lastly, both first and second years were equally involved in extracurricular activities for slightly different reasons: First years tended to make friends and reduce stress while second years wanted to increase their chances of landing a job. The overall study clearly emphasizes the importance of understanding the variations in internationals' experiences to avoid overgeneralizing as "even within one nationality, internationals' experiences comprise an intersection of various aspects (p. 620).

The research discussed in this section has identified certain factors influencing international undergraduate experience. The next section of the review of actionable knowledge will introduce Astin's Theory of Involvement: Input-Environment-Outcomes Model. It will also examine related literature to deepen understanding of the factors impacting outcomes of international students.

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement

Astin (1984) defines student involvement theory as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). His theory works as a theoretical framework by which to study the factors impacting international students' outcomes at U.S. institutions. Students' level of involvement in learning and social activities are different, and these differences can be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively through his theoretical framework. According to Astin, students who "devote considerable energy to studying, spend much time on campus, participate actively in student organizations, and interact frequently with faculty members and other students" gain more from school which leads to better personal, and professional outcomes (p. 518). On the other hand, uninvolved students tend to care less about or neglect their studies, abstain from participating in extracurricular activities,

and have infrequent interaction with faculty members and peers. Therefore, his theory associates the amount of student learning and personal development in an educational program with the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.

Addressing criticism particularly to the content theory that considers teachers as disseminators of knowledge and students as recipients of knowledge, Astin defends the active participation of students in the learning process. He recommends higher education institutions to “elicit sufficient student effort and investment of energy to bring about the desired learning and development” instead of “simply exposing the student to a particular set of courses” (Astin, 1984, p. 522). Moreover, his theory promotes the idea that intentional learning and engagement of students are more unlikely to happen if educators mostly focus on course content, teaching techniques, and other resources. On a more subtle level, the theory of involvement aims at learning the *how of student development* concerned with the behavioral processes as opposed to *the what of student development* that is focused primarily on development outcomes (Astin, 1984). Because developmental goals are closely related to the time and energy students devote to learning, educators as well as administrators must be aware of the fact that every academic practice such as student orientation and advising can significantly affect their learning process. Additionally, nonacademic factors such as the design of recreational and living facilities, regulations regarding participation, on-campus employment opportunities, and financial aid policies can influence student outcomes.

The theory of student involvement (Astin, 1984) explicitly indicates that certain factors that contribute to international students’ remaining in college are likely to increase their involvement and reduce their chances of dropping out of school. Astin believes that place of residence is the most important factor that contributes to a strong attachment to undergraduate

life for all types of students regardless of sex, race, ability, or family background. Their place of residence allows students “more time and opportunity to get involved in all aspects of campus life” such as participation in sports, honors programs, and professors’ undergraduate research projects (p. 523). The second important contributing factor is part-time employment in an on-campus job through which Astin believes students come into contact with, professors, staff, and other students. Moreover, he also states that students who interact frequently with faculty members and peers are likely to express satisfaction with their overall educational experience. On the other hand, Astin also identified negative factors that are likely to reduce involvement. Astin considered the gender effect when describing these negative factors. For example, the most common reason male students give for dropping out of their academic degree program is boredom with courses; whereas, the women cite their societal responsibilities as factors that lessen the time and energy, they can devote to being students. Both positive and negative factors are crucial to consider since they influence attendance in college, help students succeed in academics, increase student interaction with faculty members, and guide students in their career and personal development. Furthermore, students’ levels of involvement may produce different impacts on the process and outcomes of schooling. For example, students who are deeply involved academically may show less interest in art and liberalism and experience more dissatisfaction in forming friendships with other students. Astin provides several implications for faculty, administrators, and student personnel workers to design more effective learning environments and achieve maximum student involvement. Rather than focusing on just the program content and teaching techniques, they should prioritize the time and energy students devote to the learning process. Moreover, counselors and other student personnel workers have

an important role in the development process of students to monitor and increase their involvement as they operate on an individual basis with students.

Astin's Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O) Model

Astin's Input-Environments-Output (I-E-O) model (1993) is composed of three interconnected elements that explain his theoretical framework (See Figure 1): *Input* (I), *Environment* (E) and *Outcomes* (O). These elements assist understanding of the relationship between educational practices and outcomes. *Input* relates to unique demographics, backgrounds, and previous experiences that students bring as part of themselves to institutions such as high school experiences, family background, age, gender, race, language, culture, and social practices. *Environment* accounts for programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences that students will be exposed to while in college. Lastly, *outcomes* refers to the overall experiences, knowledge, and values that exist after students have graduated from school (Astin, 1993). In other words, *inputs* are personal qualities students bring initially to an educational program, which correlates with *environment*, referring to the actual experiences of students during their education, while both of which determine professional and personal *outcomes* (Astin, 1993). Overall, the theory is helpful for the considerations of the three key areas: (a) Outcomes alone are not enough to evaluate educational impact; (b) A single input cannot wholly determine any output measure without environmental considerations; (c) Both (input and outcome factors) are still limited in their usefulness without also being aware of educational environment and experiences (Astin & Antonio, 2012). The extensive application of the I-E-O model in higher education research might be attributed to its simplicity and ability in explaining empirical knowledge about variety of factors on student development that researchers have gained over the years. The model is presented in Figure 1 with these three hypotheses.

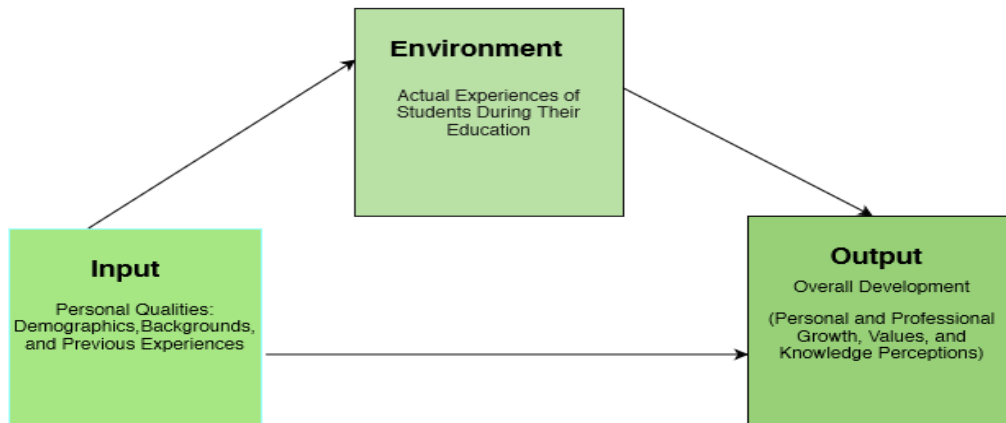


Figure 1: Astin’s (1993) Input-Environment-Outcome (I-E-O) Model

Based on the review of literature several themes emerged as important considerations for those examining the factors that influence outcomes for undergraduate international students in the U.S. Astin’s (1993) I-E-O model offers a means to examine these factors through the lens of “a less biased estimate of the comparative effects of different environments on outputs” (p.19) by controlling initial “input differences among the students by means of multivariate analysis” (p. 28). Thus, the model assists educators and administrators to “understand which educational environments and practices are most effective and under what conditions” (p. 28).

Implementing the I-E-O Model in the Study of International Students

Background characteristics (*Input*) comprise the most widely encompassing category of variables in the model. This category includes not only demographic variables such as gender, race and socioeconomic status/financial stability, but also more complex variables such as cultures and languages that students bring initially to education programs (Smith & Khawaja 2011; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Calder, Richter, Mao, Kovacs-Burns, Mogale, & Danko, 2016). Background characteristics takes into account that students do not enter college as blank sheet of paper. Rather, they come to college with personal values, beliefs and attitudes that have been developed throughout the course of their lives. What is more, their personal qualities have all

contributed to their sense of who they are and how they view the world. In an agreement with Astin (1984), Tinto (1993) stated that students' precollege characteristics (family background, social class, race, gender, and precollege schooling experience) not only influences their academic and social integration but also predicts their likelihood of dropping out. These input characteristics, emphasized by Clinton, Frost, and O'Malley (n.d.), need to be taken into account when developing programs to foster growth. These researchers particularly encouraged institutions to understand gender and cultural differences through increased awareness of how these differences are "important for education abroad recruitment, development of programs, and tailoring pre-orientation sessions towards meeting specific student needs" (p. 11). In other words, educators must pay particular attention to where college students are at the time of acceptance in terms of their values, beliefs, and ideas to think beyond the status quo when they experience different perspectives. Furthermore, social engagement of individuals is also highly influenced by input characteristics. As Zhao, Kuh, and Carini (2005) indicated, ages, genders, ethnicities, and cultures of individuals determine their ability to engage with peers from different backgrounds. Moreover, students' unfamiliarity with the language of the host country and less than 20% of four-year colleges demand more than two years of foreign language study prevent students from understanding and immersing themselves in the culture (Bok, 2006). Thus, institutions must be able to provide the necessary resources and internationalize the curriculum to serve a wide range of students for effective and successful outcomes (Clinton, Frost, & O'Malley, n.d.).

In addition to unique backgrounds, characteristics, and previous experiences of students that can serve as significant barriers to their successful adjustment into American universities, a set of variables have also been explored in relation to campus environments (*Environment*).

These include student academic engagement, social integration, and career development (Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005; Bird, 2017). As satisfaction of undergraduate experience is closely related to frequent interactions with faculty members and peers, curriculum and instruction, and individual support services, academic and social engagement can be a challenging experience for students particularly those from non-English speaking countries and different cultural affiliations. Therefore, it is possible that students from certain regions of the world are less likely to feel alienated and more likely to achieve greater satisfaction than students from other regions (Astin, 1993; Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). According to Perry (2016), simplifying the language and defining difficult terms with diverse viewpoints and non-text assignments, such as video presentations in classrooms, will lessen confusion and set students in motion to add more to the conversation. Moreover, high-quality and educationally meaningful activities with faculty members, peers, and staff will lead to managing complexity, pursuing opportunities, bridging differences and interacting across culturally diverse groups, which help students to build fundamental skill sets they need to live a productive life after graduation. In other words, social engagement helps to develop habits of the mind and heart that will serve students in their lifelong pursuit of learning by enlarging their capacity for continuous personal and professional development (Kuh, 2009). Participation in the student culture, both within and outside their learning environment, in addition to persisting in their study is important to reach better outcomes as students aim at developing their personal and social skills during their time in the U.S. (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). Furthermore, having the chance to earn work experience to acquire long-term or permanent employment in the U.S. or in their home country after graduation will increase their satisfaction level (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Lastly, displaying

patience, and recognizing and supporting multiple dimensions of students' background are listed as contributing factors on international well-beings and overall experience (Chue and Nie, 2016).

Finally, overall success of students is rooted in their ability to accept and control various factors mentioned above (language familiarity, academic and social involvement, gender differences, financial stability, and job accessibility). While some of these factors arise from prior educational experiences and cultural background, the others are college-based since these students are increasingly younger and extremely diverse. Also, existing resources and services may be insufficient to serve their needs in the U.S. higher education. Nevertheless, international students can experience significant gains in interpersonal skills and academic achievement during their college years when effective support and strategies are provided. Therefore, student involvement theory may help to analyze the causes and consequences of background effects and identify those college experience that contribute to and also counteract the overall satisfaction and experience of students.

The discussion of the literature has addressed some of the major issues that arise from the background characteristics of international students and the campus environments that international undergraduate students face in the host country. These factors have been used to examine the relationship between student engagement and satisfaction of international undergraduate students in the U.S. along with set of recommendations found in the literature to support and devote resources towards sustainable opportunities for student learning outcomes in a four-year period. The next sections of the review will summarize several of the most cited *input* (gender differences, ethnicity, financial stability and language familiarity) and *environment* factors (academic engagement, social integration, and job accessibility).

Input: Pre-college and Demographic (Background) Characteristics

Based on Astin's I-E-O model (1993), *inputs* that represent the personal qualities and skills possessed by students and brought into educational environments have significant influences on educational outcomes. These inputs have the ability to affect the academic performance, social integration, and overall outcomes for international students. Therefore, input characteristics should be carefully considered by schools in the U.S. in order to provide student support and better evaluate student needs to ease the adaptation process (Astin, 1993; Spencer-Rodgers, 2001; Tinto, 1993). These characteristics, based on what students bring with them when accepted into the university, include language familiarity, cultural, racial, and ethical identity, financial stability, and gender differences. Each characteristic is described in turn.

Language Familiarity

Language proficiency has an important impact on individuals' ability around continuous learning and development due to its key role in the transmission of information and expressions of one's feelings, ideas and attitudes. Familiarity with the language helps students when interacting with people of a diverse range of backgrounds and cultures in the U.S. Furthermore, familiarity of an accent also helps students feel understood. Students from English-speaking countries, such as United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Ireland may have a particularly better experience than students from other countries. In addition, students from European countries may have fewer challenges because a high percentage of people speak English as a mother tongue or second language (Larson, 2006; Lee, 2007; Rienties et al., 2012). Young, Sercombe, Sachdev, Naeb, and Schartner's study (2013) found that effective communication is vital as it is the measurement of a person's capability to perform socially and

academically. Likewise, language deficiency is considered the “most important determinant of international student problems” because it affects every other problem area (Owen, 2008, p. 51).

Language in the Context of Academic Engagement and Social Integration

International students generally receive their education in their first language at home. Fluent in their home language, these students come to further their education in a new environment where communication may be a struggle in everyday life causing poor academic performances, struggles with class participation, and writing assignments. Using qualitative data collected and analyzed for over a decade through on-going interviews with 85 international students to understand what it means to be an international student at an American university, Gebhard (2012) found that international graduate students from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, China, Kenya, Argentina, and Germany often struggled with academic language problems; more specifically difficulties with academic reading, understanding teachers and taking notes during lectures and seminars. Students from Asian countries compared to the others in this study had the most difficulty when asked to contribute to a discussion as one of the participants mentioned, “Every time I got some ideas, I tended to rehearse my lines in my mind first to make sure I used the correct words and sentence structures. Whenever I was ready and brave enough to raise my hand, I found the cruel fact that the subject of discussion had moved to the next one” (p. 187). In addition to academic language problems, most students were challenged to socially interact with Americans, for example, a Chinese student told her struggle with meeting her roommate for the first time: “My new American roommate started talking really fast. I couldn’t understand anything she said after, ‘Hi. I’m Nancy.’ It was like I have never heard English before!” Similarly, fluency in a language as reported by Andrade (2006) is the major factor for successful integration as well as socio-economic and cultural adjustment process for students. She

suggested that providing language support services, such as English language courses, workshops, writing centers, and tutoring to assist international students academically and socially should be a priority to institutions. In agreement with these studies, a study at a university in the Southern U.S. with a sample of both 122 international undergraduate and graduate students from Asia, Africa, Europe, South and North America argued that English proficiency was one of the strongest predictors of academic and social adjustment (Bastien, Seifen-Adkins, & Johnson, 2018). Using self-report questionnaires covering basic demographic variables, exposure to American culture, homesickness, perceived hate, fear, stress due to change, and academic, social, and emotional adjustment to the university community, the researchers conducted correlational analyses to explore bivariate relationships among the variables of interest. The analyses revealed that English proficiency has a greater impact on the socio-cultural domain of adjustment. Lastly, recommendations such as the use of writing centers, career services, conversation groups, and professor office hours to assist international students in doing their best academically were provided in the study.

Communication barriers also influence establishing friendships between domestic and international students since building successful intercultural connections may be challenging for students who do not share the same first language. Barratt & Huba (1994), who aimed to determine the connection between English language skills and 170 international students' self-esteem through a mail survey assessing motivation, self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, participation in activities, found that international students face minimal perceived humiliation and feel less self-conscious about their accents or ethnic backgrounds if they have a significantly higher level of English ability and communication efficacy. In addition to finding a positive correlation between language skills and students' self-esteem, the research also revealed that

students may find it difficult to establish personal-level relationships to begin the process of networks: “Developing cross-cultural personal relationships might appear difficult to international students who may not feel confident about their ability to communicate with Americans, or who may have had unpleasant or embarrassing encounters with Americans that resulted from miscommunication or poor communication” (p. 431).

A review of literature on international students in the U.S conducted by Smith and Khawaja (2011) yielded a total of 94 studies - 13 qualitative and 81 quantitative. The researchers concluded that a deficiency in English language competency is the major acculturation stressor that international students face. Using the search engine EBSCO Host with title words *international student*, *foreign student* and *overseas student*, they considered the range of potential stressors that students face when studying abroad along with their coping mechanisms. The researchers mainly focused on second language anxiety that interacts with other stressors in academic domains such as assignment writing, understanding lectures, oral and written examinations, and the ability to ask questions in class. The review also highlighted the importance of language barriers in impeding international students’ attempts to make friends and interact with and relate to the locals. Furthermore, the study shared significant evidence demonstrating that lower levels of English proficiency are a predictor of acculturative stress. Lastly, the review showed that counseling services are a positive coping resource for international students when faced with difficulties; however, these services are underutilized or disregarded by students as a coping resource. In addition to these services, a variety of social support sources such as family, relatives, and friendships with co-nationals utilized by international students may not be sufficient to ward off loneliness. Thus, the review emphasized the importance of friendships with host nationals in reducing loneliness.

Intercultural relationships help students to learn about an unfamiliar culture with its own traditions and customs and build feelings of connection with domestic students and local people. A study by Mak, Brown, and Wadey (2013) invited 247 Australian-born domestic undergraduates to complete a questionnaire aimed at examining the quantity and quality of their contact with international students, levels of intergroup anxiety and intercultural communication emotions, and their attitudes toward international student. The results of their study highlighted the importance of considering challenges associated with communication when establishing relations between groups who do not share the same first language. Given the generally low levels of friendships between domestic and international students, the study also suggested that positive quality of intercultural connections must be encouraged. Reductions in prejudice, discrimination and negative emotions associated with communication are likely to produce more favorable attitudes towards international students. Additionally, strong sociolinguistic abilities are likely to help international students with sociocultural adjustments as they support the understanding of cultural cues and references, which can lead to more successful acculturation. A study on understanding the acculturation experience of international students concluded that international students that are already culturally, emotionally, and socially competent are more likely to adapt to their new environment when they have effective communicative skills to express themselves in a positive and clear manner (Bang & Montgomery, 2013). The researchers concluded that “it appears that the success of international students in their host country may be largely contingent upon their language competency, the nature of their stress-coping strategies, and an understanding of the host culture” (p.345).

Language in the Context of Creating Acculturative Stress

Unfamiliarity with the language and inadequate knowledge with the established, new cultural norms in the host country simply increase the amount of challenges experienced by international students. In other words, students struggle to adjust to the lack of familiarity, which often manifests in loneliness and isolation. Moreover, the students' inability to communicate effectively complicates their integration with local students and faculty, as well as staff members in the host country, causing a loss of social support, which may lead to rising levels of psychological and mental distress together with depression, homesickness, and alienation. Various studies focused specifically on the effect of English language proficiency on accumulative stress for those pursuing their academic degree in the U.S. to enhance both the adaptation process and outcome with this population. In a study of 189 Chinese international undergraduate and graduate students who responded to an online survey at a large public university in the Midwest, researchers examined the association between acculturative stress and depression and to find a factor to reduce the strength of this association (Wei, Heppner, Mallen, Ku, & Liao, 2007). The findings showed that when the participants are "faced with a different language, new environment, and new cultural norms, they may quickly experience difficulties in maintaining the same academic performance as before" (p. 391). These difficulties increase their vulnerability to depression as "these expectations (e.g., improving English proficiency is a slow process) may not be sufficient to meet the demands of reality (e.g., a need to improve English as soon as possible) to function well in everyday life in the U.S." (p. 391). Several studies agreed that these adjustment difficulties tended to affect international students' academic performance, mental and physical health, level of satisfaction with their cross-cultural experiences, and

attitudes toward the host nations as they seek to adapt to their new environment (Banjong, 2015; Shih and Brown, 2000; Wan et al. 1992).

Students with second language anxiety can experience thoughts of being judged by other students that can cause physiological distress leading to frustration, fear of making mistakes, and a decrease in self-confidence. A study by Khawaja and Stein (2017) particularly aimed to explore the relationship between second language anxiety and international students from various countries. In their study, 152 international students in undergraduate nursing programs at 20 Australian universities participated in an approximately 30-minute electronic survey. The study through hierarchical regression analysis found that second language anxiety and a lack of social connectedness with the host culture as well as their original culture were significantly related to learning and teaching-related as well as placement-related stress in international nursing students. The inquiry also found that international students most often cited distress with spoken second language communication as a problem. This usually prevented them from addressing their fears and enhancing their skills and strategies to coping with conflicts. The authors offered a few implications for helping international students who are studying in languages other than their native one. These implications included introduction of resources and interventions by counselling services aimed at building resilience, incorporation of management of second language issues into their current programs, and promotion of special programs and activities that target the anxiety of speaking a second language. This is consistent with the study on cultural adjustment experiences of female students from Saudi Arabia, which informed that cross-cultural transition was most impacted by the students' level of English language proficiency (Young & Clark, 2017). A few opportunities to speak their native language and less confidence in expressing their feelings in a new language make the adjustment to

college life more stressful for these students. Another specific contribution in this sense has been made by Smiljanic (2017) whose study focused on gaining a better understanding of how English language proficiency related to international students' acculturative stress and depressive symptoms. Collecting data via an online survey from 91 international students who were enrolled in a US graduate school program the researcher used Pearson correlation as a metric to determine the relationship between variables - attachment anxiety/avoidance, acculturative stress and depressive symptoms - found that the level of acculturative stress was significantly lower for participants who travelled outside of their home country as compared to participants who never traveled abroad prior to studying in the U.S. She indicated that this may be the result of their experience in traveling abroad, which may have allowed these individuals to practice a second language while providing them with confidence in themselves. Additionally, in the study, higher English proficiency scores were found to be negatively correlated with the level of acculturative stress. The findings of this study have been supported by another research study conducted by Hansen, Shneyderman, McNamara, and Grace (2018) who found that international students whose native language was English had lower acculturative stress while others needed various, effective coping strategies to lower levels of acculturative stress.

For international students, English language proficiency is an essential part of success in college in the U.S. International students whose native language is not English may require extra academic support on improving language skills from college services and faculty members along with social and academic support to combat the higher levels of acculturative stress. The next section will examine the second factor of Astin's (1993) Model — *Input* characteristics that include cultural and racial identity in transition to a new environment in the U.S.

Cultural and Racial Identity in Transition

Most international students struggle in the process of adapting to a new culture and understanding a new way of life so it will not be a surprise that most of them encounter many difficulties during this process of cultural transformation as misunderstandings may occur. It takes hard work to overcome the challenges of living in a different country. Since students identify themselves with a particular group, it is important to understand the values and norms of other cultures in order for theirs to be understood as well. While some challenges occur due to the differences in cultural values, beliefs, customs, attitudes, and behaviors of a home and host country, others take place when inaccurate assumptions and discrimination against international students make the adaptation process hard especially for certain races. Therefore, higher education institutions must play an important role in providing opportunities for cross-cultural interactions and promoting cultural awareness both for international and domestic students.

Individualistic vs. Collectivistic Cultures

New cultural norms in the host country may increase the amount of challenges experienced by international students as they bring their inherited culture of values, beliefs, customs, attitudes, and behaviors with them. Individualism and collectivism are major determinants of success of cross-cultural transition. People in American culture are thought to be individualistic, meaning independent, self-reliant, and motivated by what is personally good for them. On the other hand, many international students come to the U.S. from China and India, where members of society have a distinctively collective nature that is reflected in their daily life, such as word choices and meal preferences. Wang (2016) expressed this difference as follows: “We Chinese do not say “my country”; it is always “our country” (para. 4). He invited educators to pay particular attention to differences between collectivistic and individualistic

cultures as these are important for academic and social involvement of international students. In another study on the effects of cultural background and desired student outcomes, Telbis, Helgeson, and Kingsbury (2014) indicated that individualistic and collectivistic cultures may cause “significant obstacles when it comes to a person’s ease of acculturation or assimilation” (p. 332). Using a 20-question survey with the participation of 152 undergraduate and graduate students from 55 countries enrolled at a mid-western university, the researchers assessed their level of confidence toward degree completion. According to the findings of the study, it is extremely important for colleges to adapt a multicultural approach such as prayer rooms, a variety of international cuisine, and other welcoming services to academics and campus life to help students adopt the unique learning environment of the U.S. compared to those of other countries. As a big believer in multiculturalism, Banting (2005) clearly pointed out that it is very challenging for educators to shape or adapt a welcoming environment for all without knowledge of multiculturalism, making it increasingly difficult to understand students from different parts of the world.

Inaccurate Assumptions, Racial Stereotypes, and Discrimination

Although international students increase diversity and cultural exposures for domestic students, inaccurate assumptions coupled with the extension of discrimination against international students have made the adaptation process even harder especially for certain races. A study by Hanassah (2006), in which she surveyed 640 international undergraduate and graduate students from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Oceania, and Southeast Asia at UCLA and focused on the similarities and differences of the students as a function of their geographical region and other demographic factors such as gender, degree objective, and field of study with one open-ended question asking students to describe the most

serious case of discrimination they have experienced, revealed that discrimination affects students' educational experiences and contributes to anxiety, depression, and lowered self-esteem. Some of the discriminatory acts include comments like: "Latinos cannot be logical or scientific;" "A White guy was laughing at my name and making fun of it in public;" "I get very frustrated if a professor ignores me because my English is not as good compared to a native speaker...such times, I feel I'm stupid" (p.162). The findings of this study indicated that international students from the Southeast Asia (21%), Africa (17%) and Asia (16%) experienced more difficulty regarding stereotyping and discrimination than students from other countries when interacting with their professors. On the other hand, European international students experienced the least discrimination (8%) when interacting with classmates. A Spanish student stated, "It depends where you come from; if you are from Europe, you're OK" (p.163). Lastly, the highest percentage of discrimination was found for international students from the Middle East when interacting with classmates (22%) and applying for jobs (17%). These findings are consistent with the results of a study by Lee's (2007), who found that students from the Middle East, Africa, East Asia, Latin America, and India are faced with discrimination, making it difficult to adjust to U.S. culture when compared to students from Canada and Europe. Hanassah (2006) also shared that the results of her study could have been different if it had been conducted prior to the September 11 tragedy. This statement has been confirmed by the study of Hitlan, Carillo, Zarate, and Aikman (2007) on the relationship between realistic and symbolic threats against Mexican and Arab immigrants in the Southwestern U.S. The researchers found that since September 11, there has been a greater perception of threats against Arab immigrants in the U.S. Additionally, people originally from Mexico were more like to be depicted as lazy, criminal, and lacking ambition.

International students endure difficulties with discrimination against them at the cost of earning an American degree, which they anticipate will provide greater rewards and opportunities than obtaining a degree in their home country. However, student outcomes even with international students' tolerance of difficulties can still be negatively affected if their environment is unwelcoming. To further complicate this issue, international students also bring with them a set of stereotypes that often influence their interactions negatively with certain groups on and off-campus. Due to popular culture, racist ideologies and attacks have been spreading worldwide. Easy access to social media through which international students receive many of their stereotypes plays a significant role in shaping the racial attitudes of individuals, especially toward African-Americans and Latinos (Gilliam, Valentino, & Beckmann, 2002). This is coupled with the American film and television history, where African-Americans are depicted as indigent and Afghan, Chinese, and Iranian students are envisioned to be the future enemies of the U.S. while Europeans are portrayed as intelligent and powerful (Larson, 2006). These stereotypes often preclude international students from establishing relationships with certain groups of people in a new environment, which in turn affects the overall quality of their college experience and campus climate as a whole. Bert Berry (as cited by Althen, 2009), Director of International Services at Webster University, points out that "Too often [the international] students are only interested in associating with people from their home country and U.S. whites. They shun Blacks, Hispanics, and all other minority groups" (para. 3). Their perception of race based on stereotypical notions of White, African-American, Latino, and Asian-American students may encourage them to interact with only certain racial groups. As a consequence, many rely on partial or incorrect information on class assignments, general processes, and opportunities mostly from their international peers. For example, tensions came to a head at

UCLA when an anti-Asian video was uploaded to YouTube, in which the white female student mocked the “hordes” of Asian students and their lack of American-style manners (Parkinson-Morgan, 2011). In another study of international students, Ritter (2016) indicated that a majority of students had racial and status hierarchies and harbored prejudices toward certain races. The researcher conducted forty-seven semi-structured interviews with both graduate and undergraduate international students predominantly from China, Japan, and South Korea at UCLA, due to the ethnic and international diversity of the campus, to investigate their experience with other races and to see if there were differences between them. Ritter’s findings are similar to that of other studies mentioned above as international students held negative views toward African-Americans and Southeast Asians, resulting from media, family/friends, and historical precedents. Additionally, these students considered Latino people as being of lower economic status and more prone to commit robberies. Lastly, it was suggested that colleges must put a more concerted effort into exposing and educating East Asian international students about African-American and Latino heritage and history through different engagement programs such as identity-based dialogue courses to encourage students to challenge their racial perceptions through experiential learning and Global Siblings that pairs international students with domestic student mentors. These programs may be beneficial as many East Asian international students come from racially homogenous countries.

Building Cross-Cultural Learning and Relationships

Higher education institutions play an important role in providing opportunities for cross-cultural interactions defined as a “communication exchange with someone deemed by an interactant to be of a different ethnicity” (Burkhardt & Bennett, 2015). One of the intentions for institutions to recruit international students is to promote cultural awareness for local students.

Although discriminatory and racist practices that create physical and emotional distances between both parties continue to be a fact of life for many students, campus environments are great places because of the potential for frequent interactions among international and domestic students. Institutions must be continually developed to foster orientations, offer diversity trainings where students can talk openly about their feelings, and adopt programs and services.

Having a diverse group of students simply means recognizing that people are unique and different in their own way, including their cultural backgrounds, personalities, religious beliefs, and lifestyles. Since one of the most important missions of higher education institutions in the U.S. is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access, Lee encouraged institutions to be aware of issues pertaining to international students “as campus administrators and student affairs professionals hold a particular responsibility for creating as welcoming an atmosphere for international students as they do for domestic students” (2007, p.29). He advised both educators to consider using multiple discussion formats to allow diverse approaches to voicing opinions and institutions to move beyond cultural sensitivity training and enforce strict codes of conduct regarding discriminatory statements and behaviors. In agreement with Lee (2007), Li and Zizzi (2018) pointed out that promoting continuous supports to create diverse student body and welcoming campus communities for all students must be the furthering mission for institutions and administrators. Gebhard (2012), on the other hand, placed the responsibility for cultural adjustment on both international students who need to make efforts to adjust and the university that must sincerely welcome all international students, as well as help build a positive community. Thus, a close consideration of cultures is crucial as students may have struggles to work together to develop a mutual and beneficial relationship due to their differences.

Financial Stability

Many international students face economic difficulties. Spending their parents' hard-earned money makes them feel like a source of burden on their families, resulting in stress or anxiety, which may affect their academic performance and overall satisfaction at a foreign university (Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012). These difficulties are likely to be nonexistent or almost insensible for students from wealthier households and communities back in their home country or sponsored by their government to pursue their education in the U.S. Choudaha and University of California (2018) explained that cost of tuition and fees is the most important factor impacting students' decision to study at the U.S. institutions after visa-related issues as many institutions are becoming very expensive. Furthermore, they pointed out that increasing cost of U.S. higher education, resulting from the financial crisis and severe budget cuts, shifted institutions to search for self-funded international students. More specifically, the study stated that Saudi Arabian students with scholarships from their government and Chinese students from upper-middle class families have been targeted by institutions to sustain the competitiveness of American higher education in terms of financial, intercultural, and educational contributions. This view of Choudaha and University of California (2018) was in agreement with the conclusion of Kauko and Medvedeva (2016) and Choudaha (2017), who argued that high tuition fees were to compensate for the educational budget cuts and to cope with the probable decline in international applications. However, the lack of affordability and the absence of scholarships were main reasons for dissatisfaction reported by international students (Schulte & Choudaha 2014). Although institutions desire to attract more international students, limited opportunities for scholarships and graduate assistantships, coupled with high tuition rates, influence international student mobility.

Although universities offer scholarships, teaching assistantships, and research funding to pay the tuition and bills for qualified international students, restrictions issued by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service create huge barriers for international students to legally work in the U.S. (Cantwell, 2015). Moreover, international undergraduate students are required to be registered for a minimum of 12 credit hours per semester to maintain full-time student status in spite of the fact that they have limited financial support, employment opportunities, and educational loan options. To make the matter worse, international students are sometimes charged fees when there are no fees for national students who also receive government subsidies (Cantwell, 2015). Reporting their findings from 75 surveys and 4 semi structured interviews related to housing information, access, choices, and challenges with international graduate students from diverse backgrounds at a western Canadian university, Calder, Richter, Mao, Kovacs-Burns, Mogale, and Danko (2016) found that affordability was the biggest problem among students as most of them spent over 30% of their income on housing accommodations and had a lack of knowledge on where to find assistance to address their concerns about cost of living, high tuition fees, and lack of working opportunities. In addition to accommodation problems, they indicated that the stipend they received for holding teaching and research assistant positions was the same as domestic students even though they paid higher tuition, creating “a hardship particularly for students from less affluent countries” (p. 98). Dealing with regulations to work lawfully off-campus and competing with domestic students for on-campus jobs forced them to take menial jobs, with a participant admitting “my identity was kind of taken away from me” (p. 99). Furthermore, the analysis revealed that students gave false information on living expenses to obtain a visa that required individuals to have a certain amount of money in their bank account. One participant said, “When they give you the visa, they ask you

do you have this much money, whatever it is, ten thousand dollars. . . . Who in [participant's home country] has ten thousand dollars? . . . What do we do is . . . put money into an account from different people, provide the paper that says you have it, and then everybody takes it away so when you come here, you actually don't have the money" (p. 101). Finally, the study acknowledged the importance of raising the awareness of international students' unique challenges as an important step to initiate support from universities.

In addition to the challenges such as pressure to succeed, language difficulties, and cultural differences, a significant number of international students are in financial difficulty or at risk. Thus, it is essential that education regulators and providers offer consistent and caring procedures to deal with student welfare through sophisticated and widespread programs and a clear explanation of financial responsibilities that students must take if they choose to study abroad (Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012; Cai & Kivistö, 2013).

Gender Differences

As the roles of women have been rapidly changing in societies, the enrollment of female international students in institutions of higher education has been increasing. For example, 35.7% of all college degrees in Korea were granted to females in 2015 while the percentage was 17.8% in 2005, showing more than 41.6% increase (Korean Women's Development Institute, 2017). Additionally, the proportions of female students in tertiary education increased by 80.11% between 2012 and 2016 in China (Sustainable Development Goals, 2017). The same case applies to Saudi Arabia where 46% of the students entering tertiary education were women in 2014 (OECD, 2016). In the end, as more female students pursue higher education, more of them choose to study abroad to reach their full potential. Considering the sharp increase in the number of female international students, their adjustment to the host culture deserves special attention as

previous studies in international student adjustment often reported that female international students suffer from more adjustment problems than their male counterparts due to the fact that female students have a harder time adapting to their environment and changing gender roles.

Gender in Relation to Traditionalism

The norms governing women's roles in society and obligations of traditional gender roles limit female international students' perceptions about what is achievable, which is obstructing them from adjusting to the host culture. A study on the experiences of international female graduate students at a southern American university explored how international female students cope with academic and social difficulties in a new cultural environment (Contreras-Aguirre & Gonzalez, 2017). With the aim to address the experiences of these students, the researchers collected data through six individual detailed open-ended interviews with students that were enrolled at a masters' or doctoral program and whose native language was not English. Although the origin of these six students' nationality was not revealed in the study, these detailed interviews gave the researchers a chance to understand the participants' feelings and thoughts prior to living in the U.S. as well as after becoming an international student. The participants shared mixed-feelings of making the right decision about studying abroad, for example, while a student stated that "I was very scared, very very scared, because I've never lived away from my family and I don't know what or how it will be, to live without my family..." the other one admitted that I felt excited because I was about to discover a new culture, a new world... I was terrified about not knowing what exactly is expecting from me..." (p. 39). The study revealed that feelings of being discriminated against due to their gender coupled with being foreign in the host country limited their acceptance with domestic students. Moreover, the main coping strategy among all the participants to overcome problems associated with gender difference was the

building relationships with Americans. Thus, difficulties in making close and long-lasting relationships with Americans forced these students to be surrounded with people from their own nationality and culture.

The adaptation process is even more difficult for international students who are now experiencing a non-segregated, mixed-gender social and academic environment for the first time in their lives as they come from a segregated culture. Young and Clark (2017) invited eleven female graduate students from Saudi Arabia (SA) to share their prior expectations about studying in the U.S. in comparison with their experiences as temporal residents in the non-segregated US society and mixed-gender academic classrooms. The researchers utilized multiple forms of data collection methods including demographic surveys regarding name, contact, gender, age, marital status, time in US, major, and city / country of origin, open-ended oral interviews regarding cultural stress, significant differences in cultural practices in the US versus SA, and experiences with discrimination, and observational field notes. Findings that were reported in a narrative that provided descriptive, interpretive accounts of the naturally-occurring acculturation experiences of the students revealed that all participants coming from the gender-segregated society and academia in Saudi Arabia experienced various challenges to success as well as cultural and social differences in gender relation, socially prescribed dress, norms, values, and religious practices during their adaptation process. A participant shared a discriminatory conversation that she had with an old man walking on the street: “When he saw me, he said, “are you crazy?” and I said “why?” He said why are you wearing that veil/hijab and I said this is my religion and he said you are in the freedom country, so you don’t have to wear that. I said if this is a country for freedom then this is my freedom. Let me practice my freedom then” (p. 5). Another participant in the same study shared a similar experience: “When I used to cover my face, some people

called me a ninja. Florida people are really racist. That's what they told us" (p. 5).

Discriminatory experiences with local people also followed these participants in their academic environment as they had a difficult time with interacting with classmates and teachers. With many more actual words of the participants in this study, the researchers emphasized how gender norms and cultural identity significantly influenced international female students from Saudi Arabia while studying in a non-segregated society and mixed-gender academic setting. This is consistent with the study of Alsahafi and Shin (2017) on factors affecting Saudi students' educational experiences in which they reported that it is likely to be difficult for Saudi female students to build relationships with others considering they had lived in a segregated culture until they moved to the U.S.

There is no doubt that gender role beliefs depend on the gender of a student. However, it is also important to remember that "a person's gender role beliefs are also influenced by culture and linked to the way in which his or her ethnic identity is conceptualized and cultural contact and participation experienced" (Tang & Dion, 1999, p.28). Therefore, values inherent in gender roles must be taken into account when assessing gender role beliefs.

Gender in Relation to Cultural Adjustment and Support-Seeking

While the challenges that come with gender roles can be an acculturation stressor for some international students, it can also be a strong motivator for better adjustment to a new culture for others. Growing literature suggests that international female students exposed to Western culture report better adjustment to a different educational system, culture and in some cases language than their male peers. For example, Ying and Han (2006) found that female Taiwanese students were more willing to foster American culture and likely to try harder to form cross-cultural relationships than their male counterparts. This finding is in accordance with the

findings of a study by Lee, Park, & Kim (2009) who examined gender differences in academic adjustment using a 5-point Likert scale response format with seventy-six Korean international students studying abroad at US universities. They argued that female Korean students may not necessarily be restrained by traditional gender norms and role expectations in the U.S. as the country offers them more freedom and less inequalities. Because these students are no longer constrained by a stereotype of femininity as they were in their home country, a high level of motivation and strong self-determination that come with freedom led them to be more independent and provided them with higher potential of cultural adjustment and academic success, even more so than males. Similarly; in a study of seven female graduate students that are diverse in terms of countries of origin (China, Ukraine, Iran, and Kyrgyzstan), academic programs (Engineering, Architecture, Education, and Business) and life situations (married and single) Le, LaCost, and Wismer (2016) found that participants had positive perceptions of the study abroad experience at their university in the U.S. They particularly emphasized their personal growth and development, independent living, confidence in social and academic situations, evaluation of knowledge, and involvement with people and activities that exposed them to diverse perspectives as a result of being an international student in the U.S. Furthermore, they have learned to create new support networks consisting of professors and advisors as well as friends, and on-campus services while losing the ones they had in their home country. Additionally, all of the participants were grateful for the opportunity to study in the U.S. and appreciative of people who assisted them along the way as “for most of them, this was a dream come true” (p. 143). Based on their findings, the researchers provided several recommendations to universities and academic departments on providing better support services such as more formal training for faculty on working with diverse student populations and a series of events

targeting international female graduate students to establish a sense of belonging with the institution as a whole. Consistent results have been found across studies among Korean students (Chung, Chen, Jung, & Li, 2018) as well as Turkish students (Cetin, Bahar, & Griffiths, 2017).

The effect of social network and support of families, friends, and student services may differ by gender. Because gender is associated with support-seeking, unlike male students who consider seeking physical and mental health as well as social and academic support as a potential threat to their sense of independence (DePaulo, 1982), female students have a greater propensity to express their needs and tend to look for source of help from parents, intimate relationships with peers, and advisers more frequently than males do (Thoits, 1995). In other words, female international students who aim to develop meaningful relationships with people turn to family members and friends more readily in times of crisis. In consistent with these studies, Tang and Dion (1999) found in a survey study of 106 Chinese university students at the University of Toronto that males were more traditional than females, with respect to beliefs about gender roles and family hierarchy making them even less likely to engage in help seeking behavior.

Considering the fact that male and female students have different traditional gender roles, emotional responses, and academic and social needs and support, it is important to be aware of these significant forces impacting adaptation and experience of international students to provide the appropriate level of assistance. The next section will review several of the most cited *environment* factors (academic engagement, social integration, and job accessibility).

Environment: Educational Experience and Involvement

Environment that refers to the student's actual experiences during the educational program includes integration into the social and academic life of the campus, enriching educational experiences, supportive campus environment, and current employment status (Astin,

1993). Three environmental factors that have been explored in relation to student inputs and outcomes — academic engagement, social integration, and potential job accessibility — will be described in turn.

Academic Engagement

Academic engagement encompasses continuous participation in classes, the time and effort invested in studying that vary from student to student, and interactions with faculty and staff members as well as classmates in and outside of classrooms (Astin, 1993). Student satisfaction with the college environment is vital considering the time and energy students invest in attending college. According to Astin (1993), satisfaction of undergraduate experience is associated with frequent interaction with faculty and other students, curriculum and instruction, individual support services, and facilities. Although this can be a challenging experience for international undergraduate students, particularly those from non-English speaking countries and different cultural affiliations, engagement in academic tasks and interactions with faculty and classmates are two necessities for a higher level of satisfaction.

A considerable number of studies published to date has confirmed the notion that academic and social engagement have the power to produce greater outcomes. Zhao, Kuh, and Carini (2005), for example, compared the engagement in academic activities between international students and American students in the U.S. context. Although the data they gathered from 317 four-year universities to measure the degree to which students participate in educational practices did not allow them to identify international students' countries of origin and cultural norms, they used racial identification as the proxy and categorized them into Asian, White, and Black. They found that international students, who perceived greater gains in personal and social development and general education, were also more engaged in the areas of

academic challenge and student-faculty interaction, compared to U.S. students. On the other hand, the engagement patterns of these three races showed differences as Asian international students were less engaged in active and collaborative learning and had lower satisfaction with their educational experiences than their Black international peers. Furthermore, senior Black international students surpassed their White international peers in almost all engagement areas such as academic challenge, student interactions with faculty, and active and collaborative learning while they fell behind the White seniors on the areas of relaxing and socializing, computer, technology, and supportive environment. A decade later, Korobova and Starobin (2015), used 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement data comprising a 20% random sample of all first-year and senior-year international students and a 20% random sample of all first-year and senior students who were domestic students at a university in the U.S. to examine the relationship between student engagement, student satisfaction, and the academic success of both students, found very similar results. According to their study, international students scored slightly higher than American students in level of academic challenges, such as synthesizing and organizing ideas, and making judgments about the value of information and methods during their senior year. Additionally, they had more engaging and interactive conversations with students of different races as a result of institutional assistance on providing the support they needed to thrive socially. Korobova and Starobin's (2015) study is also in line with Bird (2017), who invited ten international postgraduate students from Burma, Ghana, Malaysia, Mauritius, Nepal, Senegal, and Somalia to participate in a semi-structured focus group study at a U.K university, which was followed with an online survey emailed to twelve university staff. With the aim of exploring student and staff perceptions of academic and social factors influencing learning process of international postgraduate students, thematic analysis demonstrated that international

students experienced feelings of stress and confusion in which their learning was structured by the university. These feelings were influenced by their prior educational experiences as their formal schools in their home country had different expectations. A participant noted: “It’s different in terms of how they want students to learn. For me, back home, it’s all very ‘taught’, you just learn what you’re taught and there’s hardly any work to do on your own...this course requires a lot of discipline in terms of managing your own time, apart from just attending the lectures” (p. 335). Moreover, participants also commented on feelings of intimidation from local students because of their lack of knowledge about UK educational systems. One student, for example, reflected: “They [UK home students] probably have more...are better opinionated to say something in class, whereas international students, we’re not as aware or knowledgeable about the UK context” (p. 338). On the other hand, university staff mentioned the benefits of the variety of learning and teaching approaches they used to help students adjust to postgraduate level study such as small group seminars, workshops, and multimedia teaching and learning approaches as positive program attributes of student engagement. Despite the initial difficulties to adjust to academic expectations, students in this study were broadly positive about their experiences as they identified numerous improvements in their academic skill set through the techniques used by the university staff to assist international students in adjusting to life at a UK university.

Facilitating a Connected Classroom Climate

Confirming responses and behaviors of professors and classmates in classrooms influence student academic success and involvement as these responses and behaviors help build supportive teacher-student and student-student relationships. Moreover, having positive relationships with the faculty members and classmates help students feel confident about

themselves and their communication skills, which can lead to a warm classroom environment that facilitates successful adaptation in school and thereby increasing student motivation to learn. In the end, international students will comparatively “experience less fear or anxiety, and they are more likely to express ideas or opinion in class” (Hsu & Huang, 2017). A study in the institutions across the U.S. with 122 graduate international students from diverse national backgrounds, including Asia or Pacific Island, Europe, Middle East, and Africa revealed that the challenges of adjusting to a different educational system increase the possibility of students receiving low grades, which leads to a loss of academic self-efficacy (Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002). On the other hand, students with higher levels of academic self-efficacy reported fewer adjustment problems as they initiated more academic interactions with professors and classmates or asked for academic help about an assignment. The study of Frisby and Martin (2010) also provided insight into students’ relationships with both instructors and fellow classmates. The researchers found that strong classroom connectedness is a result of interpersonal relationships with both instructors and students. Instructors were particularly encouraged to create a positive classroom environment which included engaging in casual and personal conversation and utilizing techniques to foster positive relationships with students and between students. Similarly, another study on the importance of positive attitudes and perceptions in the classroom with 434 undergraduate students who were Caucasian, African American, Hispanic or Latino, Asian, and Native American confirmed that students are unlikely to learn well if they do not have positive attitudes and perceptions in the classroom (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). Multiple regression analysis was used to evaluate the influence of several measures - teacher confirmation behaviors, student-to-student connectedness, willingness to talk in class, and the metacognitive self-regulation subscale - included in surveys. According

to the findings, teacher confirmation behaviors and student-to-student connectedness are the key components to positive instructional outcomes as they encourage students to communicate more receptively to each other. Therefore, it was recommended that instructors must foster positive social environments in their classrooms by allowing students opportunities to build positive relationships with one another and encouraging class participation in an effort to create a communication climate, which allows students to feel acknowledged. Confirming Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield's findings (2010), Hsu and Huang (2017) investigated instructional practices and classroom environments with one hundred and twenty-one international students from 36 countries at a western university in the U.S. to learn whether teacher confirmation and classroom connectedness increase students' willingness to talk in class and reduce classroom apprehension. The results of the online questionnaire indicated that teacher confirmation behaviors and positive relationships among teachers and classmates influence classroom apprehension and participation positively while they experience less fear in expressing their ideas or opinions in class. Some practices for building supportive climates with good interpersonal skills such as using more visual aids in lectures, allowing students sufficient time to offer responses, discussing cultural differences in class in order to create a non-threatening learning environment, and promoting personal interest in discussion have been recommended by previous studies.

Creating a Student-Centered Learning

Academic involvement of students can be further encouraged through serving individual needs. According to some studies, this may be accomplished with teaching practices that are culturally inclusive. Sherry, Thomas, and Chui (2010) pointed out that "institutions which do not address the unique needs of international students may leave these students feeling disappointed, unfulfilled, and even exploited" (p. 33-34). Addressing these needs starts with understanding

what students already bring to their institutions to properly support them in their current academic environments, which requires providing the right programs and services in response. Bhowmik and Kim (2018) emphasized the importance of recognizing that students acclimatize differently and at different rates when it comes to new academic cultures. Thus, instructors are encouraged to adjust the course content accordingly and provide extra support through, more office hours and one-to-one sessions with students. Additionally, an online survey at a Canadian college carried out with 229 international students from diverse nationalities (mostly Chinese, Hindi, Punjabi, Spanish, Russian, and Korean), 343 domestic students, and 125 professors indicated that providing culturally relevant pedagogy focusing on both domestic and international students, will be beneficial as faculty may lack training on how to effectively support second language learners and deal with the issues they bring with them (Macgregor & Folinazzo, 2018). In doing so, the researchers also encouraged educators to learn from and about international students including their culture, politics and customs. Furthermore, delivering lectures at a normal pace with visual aids, posting assignments ahead of time, and providing task goals as well as explicit summaries between sections have been suggested for improving transition to new academic settings. Lastly, internationalizing curricula, materials, and activities to enable interaction with students from diverse background was recommended as vital for fostering creativity and flexibility and helping prepare both international and domestic students to be aware of global issues and maintaining the quality and competitiveness of Higher Education. These findings have been consistent with the findings of Bastien, Seifen-Adkins, and Johnson (2018) who highlighted the importance of cultural awareness and sensitivity training for faculty and staff to understand the unique needs of international students and Wang and BrckaLorenz (2018) who encouraged faculty to engage with international students through some

effective strategies such as role playing, small group activities, and team projects in an effort to create an inclusive classroom environment.

Faculty members enable higher levels of academic engagement which guide students to learn to work well with others if they know how students learn, create a student-centered campus and develop classroom techniques accordingly. This is important for international students who face many challenges while transitioning into new academic and social roles. To successfully shoulder responsibilities and face challenges in the future, the Greater Expectations report revealed that learners need to think analytically, communicate effectively, and solve problems in collaboration with diverse individuals to develop sophisticated intellectual skills. Furthermore, the report suggested institutions to teach students to think clearly, explore multiple fields and modes of inquiry, and gain practical knowledge in a particular field to be recognized for success in school (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002). Students can achieve these qualities and deepen understanding through active involvement in college, which also help them to socialize as well as become oriented to campus and involved in and out of class.

Social Integration

Academic engagement is among the most influential college experiences that contribute to cognitive or intellectual development of international college students (Astin, 1984). Particularly, faculty preparedness together with the curriculum and programming that address their needs, which has a well-known impact on student achievement, emerges as a principal determinant of satisfaction. However, students also need to feel belonged and be part of the student culture as much as they need to persist in their study (Tinto, 1998).

Social integration defined as “the extent to which students adapt to the social way-of-life at university” by Rienties, Beusaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers (2012) has a

positive influence on the academic performance of international students. Social integration is closely related concept to social support that refers to the functional content of relationships such as the perceived or actual emotional and informational assistance received (House & Kahn, 1985). Support given by family, friends, and teachers has a positive influence on the study-success of international students. In other words, “having friends, sharing accommodation with other students as well as contacts with the university staff” are particularly important for social competences of interpersonal, intercultural, and collaboration skills (Rienties et al., 2012, p. 687). Using questionnaires with a sample of 670 international undergraduate students from various countries and 288 Dutch students at five business schools in the Netherlands for a study on the relationship between social integration and academic performance, Rienties et al. (2012) also found that non-Western students have more social, personal and emotional adjustment issues indicating that adaptation to the Western way of life at their university was more challenging for non-Western students. Measuring students’ academic integration with the students’ adaptation to college questionnaire and students’ social integration with their own developed questionnaire based upon a literature review, the study showed that difficulties in adjustment, coupled with less encouragement and emotional and financial support from family and friends, led to lower personal and emotional well-being. Another study on the issue of integration in relation to academic performance was conducted by Severiens and Wolff (2008) who argued that students who feel at home, feel connected with teachers and fellow-students, and take part in extra-curricular activities are more likely to graduate as their social interactions with class mates and teachers impact quality of learning positively.

Students need to participate in the student culture, both within and outside their learning environment in addition to persisting in their study in order to reach their full potential (Tinto,

1998). However, international students lose their network of support given by family and friends once they move overseas. As a result, they experience problems of personal loneliness, especially in the early months (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Fritz, Chin, & DeMarini, 2008). Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) found out that social integration of international students is important for their academic performance and building a sense of connection to the destination country. Researchers at the University of Brighton conducted interviews with 34 first-year students from three ethnic groups: White British, Afro-Caribbean, and mixed ethnicity. In this study, the researchers found that a lack of social support was one of the main reasons that students withdrew from the university. One study-participant reflected that "looking back now I think why did I get so upset? Because you do feel really lonely and I think that really plays on your mind, so that you feel so bad, that you feel so, you know, you are just so desperate to go home, you really are desperate" (p. 713). In order to help students adapt to the higher education environment, the importance of approachable academic staff, particularly personal tutors, were recommended.

Important of Social Connectedness among International Students

With increased access to American higher education, the shift in enrollment practices and interactions with academically and socially diverse peers have become an integral part of college life in the U.S. Although research has shown that relationships with other international students “play a critical role in staving off depression, improving academic performance, and increasing student satisfaction with their college experience” (Glass & Braskamp, 2012), for those who choose to mainly interact with people from their home country, the involvement in cross-racial interactions is likely to stay at a minimum rate (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). Studying 150 postgraduate international students from South East Asia, Europe, Africa, and the

Middle East at a university in the south of England over a long period to obtain the insider perspective on their cross-cultural experience, Brown (2009) discovered that increased contact with the host culture was valued by students for its capacity to lead to personal growth, cultural and linguistic learning, and improved career prospects. However, expectations of students to building social connectedness with local people in the host national were mostly unfulfilled as an Indonesian participant mentioned, “I don’t know why but I can’t find a lot of British friends Sometimes I want to practice my English more. Only slowly I make progress, very slow!” and another Taiwanese student agreed, “We cannot reach them, we don’t know how!” (p. 443-444). Consistent with Brown (2009), Gareis, Merkin, and Goldman (2011) indicated that intercultural friendships with domestic students positively impact academic success, foreign-language development, and general satisfaction of these students. However, meaningful relationships with host nationals remain missing in these students’ lives as they consistently report facing obstacles, such as a combination of verbal proficiency in the host country’s language and importance placed on emotion-focused forms of communication, to develop fewer friends with domestic students than with students from their own or other countries while studying abroad. Analyzing the responses to an online questionnaire with the participation of 127 international undergraduate students mostly from Caribbean, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Russia/Central Asia, Latin America, and Europe at a large urban university in New York City, the results of the Pearson correlation showed that participants were not as satisfied with American friendships in term of numbers and quality as they were with home- or other-culture friendships as satisfaction levels concerning host-national friendships remained low in the study. Additionally, the analysis of data showed that students with high levels of communicative adaptability had more American friends and were more satisfied with these friendships. These findings were confirmed with the later research

of Gareis (2012) who found that international students' reluctance to communicate with Americans impedes their learning, disrupts smoother transitioning into U.S. universities, and costs them to enrich their respective experiences. Additionally, Wang, Ahn, Kim, and Lin-Siegler (2017) stated that non-native English speakers feel greater anxiety when they are in situations, where they have to speak English due to limited interactions with Americans as their analysis revealed that domestic students may have a bias towards students with heavy accents.

Internationalization in Action

University administrations and researchers have proposed a variety of approaches to create safe and welcoming environments through the encouragement of cross-cultural interactions between domestic and international students. Programs such as “*Campus Cousins, Friendship Families, and Global Greek*” pairs international students with American students, local families and fraternity or sorority members and “*Global Partners program*” matches experienced-abroad students with new international students and holds orientation events for international students during the first academic year (Redden, 2013). Mustaffa and Ilias (2013) offered multicultural training workshops to local students to be more aware of cultural diversity and suggested universities to encourage host country students to have more interaction with international students in a friendly atmosphere. Additionally, staff members in higher education institutions must support campus integration of international students by offering credited courses, seminars, and trainings that provide opportunities to build friendships amongst international students from various countries apart from increasing the level of communication with American students. Moreover, counselors can cultivate peer-support, faculty contacts as well as create a close working relationship with the international student services office on campus to internationalize initiatives (Arthur, 2017). Aldawsari, Adams, Grimes, and Kohn

(2018) agreed that providing cultural diversity classes at schools, engaging them in cross-cultural activities, such as events and presentations, and establishing international networks may benefit international students to develop a better sense of connectedness with host nationals. In line with these recommendations, Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2018) also claimed that university-sponsored events, such as conversation partner programs, are important for fostering social interactions between domestic and international students, which may lead to the development of meaningful friendships. These initiatives can play a significant role in these students' adjustment and learning outcomes in comparison to those who do not have strong relationships within the host country as well as perceptions held by members of the destination country.

Potential Job Accessibility

International student career development including challenges of pursuing and maintaining opportunities is one of the most important aspects of international student experience that needs a substantial amount of support. In other words, the prospects of increased job market competitiveness are central to why many international students spend a significant amount of time and money abroad. A limited literature on international student career development shows that students are mostly concerned with earning work experience, obtaining part-time employment or internship while in school, acquiring long-term or permanent employment in the U.S. or in their home country after graduation, developing specialized skills related to their field of study, and learning about supports or facilitating factors, labor market, barriers, and legal requirements, including immigration regulations. In her study on career-development needs of international students, Spencer-Rodgers (2000) stated that greater importance on vocational matters has been placed not only by the individuals concerned but also their families, communities, as well as home and host countries. She shared a multitude of

unique career-development concerns students had such as language and cultural barriers in job search and strict legal regulations on securing employment in the U.S. With a sample of 227 international undergraduate and graduate students mainly from Asia, Europe, and Latin America through a questionnaire, the study revealed that students greatly needed work experience, as well as job-search skills and career-planning activities. To reduce these great needs, the researcher suggested career services to determine the foreign clients' residency plans, assist both U.S.-focused and return-focused international students in understanding the job-search process and employment market as well as gaining employment. Similarly, Shen and Herr (2004) stated that the lack of a coherent policy to respond to students' career needs and success in U.S. higher education is a critical concern. Using a phenomenological framework, structured interviews were conducted with a sample of 19 international graduate students from 18 countries, 3 academic advisers, and 2 career counselors. The study found that students planning to return home upon graduation are influenced by various factors such as financial commitment, sense of security, promotion, and family ties. Similarly, students planning to stay in the U.S. indefinitely are under the influence of better financial opportunities and working environment. Although all of the participants had unique stories about their goals, the interviews revealed a common goal among these students: they continuously looked for sources of help to plan their next steps. However, these students felt lack of support as they found career centers unwelcoming for students of different cultural backgrounds, with one participant commenting, "when international students as something about jobs, the counselor is not a counselor anymore. They are people from the government to prevent foreign students from staying in the United States. It seems they don't care about us" (p.23). Lastly, the findings indicated that international students were in great needs to gain work experiences as well as professional support to find desirable jobs.

Employment Restrictions

Students have a few options to pursue an employment before and after graduation in the U.S. Individuals with an F-1 Visa that is a type of non-immigrant student visa allowing foreigners to pursue their education in the U.S. may have the opportunity to gain on-the-job-learning experience that supplements the knowledge gained during their academic studies. However, most of these opportunities are on-campus, limited to graduate students, and restricted by a weekly 20-hour work limit. On the other hand, off-campus employment requires some form of written or documented authorization issued by either the USCIS (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services) or OISS (Office for International Students and Scholars) giving students in F-1 status 3 options, none of which are allowing them to stay longer than 3 years. One of them is Optional Practical Training (OPT) that is employment or training directly for international students to obtain actual work experience in the U.S. for 12 months of full-time. Second option is Curricular Practical Training (CPT) that is a part-time off-campus employment or an internship to receive unit credit for a class in which these students have enrolled. The last option grants students one-year work authorization due to economic hardship caused by unforeseen circumstances. This is the only work permit that allows employment that is unrelated to the study program (OISS, n.d., “Working F-1 Students”). To make matters worse, these eligibility requirements and legal rulings are constantly changing, which is not making the process any easier for these students (USCIS, 2018, “Students and employment”).

Reverse Culture Shock: The Challenges of Returning Home

In addition to the desire to work in the U.S., gaining a competitive advantage in the international job market and finding career-oriented employment back home are the other motivating factors behind students’ decision to study in the U.S. Although approximately 70% of international students reported that they would like to remain in the country permanently

postgraduation (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014), students who are planning to return home face another unique challenge that is “to engage in job search and deal with transition back to one’s home country or another country after several years of education in the U.S.” (Balin, Anderson, Chudasama, Kanagasingam, and Zhang, 2016, p. 1054). In relatively little research on reentry issues back to the home country and cultural shock, it is generally recognized that the transition process involves in leaving the host culture and student role behind, while making career development plans at the end of the international transition. After examining the experience of 8 individuals from Russia, Liberia, Germany, and Cyprus who returned home after studying and leaving abroad for a period of 3 to 10 years through open-ended and unstructured interviews, Christofi and Thompson found that participants had personal struggles between missing their home country and feeling unable to live there at the same time, with one participant reflection “So it was definitely a struggle, especially at the beginning . . . in the first year everything seemed small and dusty. . . . In the second year I still had that knot in my stomach” (2007, p.57). Intense feelings of irritation, frustration, and difficulties within the society of their home country were experienced by these individuals, for example, a participant from Germany commenting “People had a really hard time understanding me . . . and they would tell me to my face that they had no idea what I was saying. So it got really frustrating. . . . I had a really hard time adjusting to the German-ness of people again” (p. 57). Confirming these findings, Ai and Wang (2017) narrated the first author’s (Ai) personal experiences of integration into several Chinese universities as a PhD graduate after two years returning from Australia. His reflection revealed struggles in negotiating his identities and integrating into the Chinese academic community. Additionally, the study showed the unwelcoming environment of Chinese universities that do not offer supportive conditions and specific policies for academic returnees to do research work even

though they are willing to recruit them. Furthermore, processes for an effective dialogue between university administrators and academic returnees were suggested as part of the internationalization process of average Chinese universities as some universities do not consider academic returnees as capable of offering much.

Career Planning Process: Working in the U.S. and Beyond

Challenges are not limited to visa requirements and adaptation to the home country. The lack of knowledge of prospects employees in the host country has been worsened with cultural differences and language incompetency of international students, especially from non-European backgrounds. According to the findings from the survey projects conducted by the National Career Development Association (NCDA)'s International Student Services Committee (ISSC), a lack of knowledge of prospects employees on work authorization topics such as Curricular Practical Training and Optional Practical Training was one of the major issues for hiring international students, which may cause many qualified candidates to be dismissed in the initial screening process of job applications (Balin et al., 2016) In their study on the important practical challenges of pursuing and maintaining opportunities, the researchers invited institutions to provide international students with comprehensive understanding on career development process. Based on the surveys with random samples of 1422 students, 373 career development professionals, and 84 employers, the findings showed a lack of knowledge on work authorization topics among international students, career services professionals and employers. Since work authorization significantly impacts the career development of international students, the researchers suggested career services professionals to have “a more accurate and complete understanding of the process in order to facilitate an effective exploration of career possibilities and set realistic career goals” (p. 1055). Although career services professionals reported cultural

and language differences as one of the most significant concerns impacting the job and internship application process, employers and students did not indicate these differences as profound on the hiring decisions as they did work authorization status. On the contrary, employers valued these differences as they enhanced diversity in the workplace. However, they expected students to be able to demonstrate their strengths and discuss their immigration status confidently during interviews. These findings are in agreement with a previous study of Nunes and Arthur (2013) who states that students' lack of work experience and networks as well as citizenship status are other major barriers to employment. Recognizing significant differences in language and culture among international students, Jiang (2018) explored possible differences in career outcomes of international bachelor's degree recipients by region of origin through the National Survey of Recent College Graduates completed by 22,033 bachelor's degree recipients who graduated from U.S. institutions two or three years prior to the survey year and worked full-time. While majority of participants were from Asia and North and South America, at least 10 per cent of them were from Europe and Africa. The researcher emphasized the important effect of the region of origin in major-job match, annual earnings, and job satisfaction as it played a vital role in shaping career success of participants. The study, for example, found that it was more likely for individuals from Asia, Europe, and North and South America to have jobs related to their undergraduate majors, compared to those from Africa.

Those challenges have raised serious questions and required widespread agreement for universities who are now expected to develop the employability skills of international students and enlighten them about their immigration status in order to prepare them for internships and employment (Loo et al., 2017). Balin et al., (2016) stated that "College students and their families are increasingly questioning the return on investment of a college education, which is

often measured by successful attainment of a satisfying job upon graduation.” Similarly, Jiang (2018) indicated that it is important for U.S. postsecondary institutions to understand career outcomes of international bachelor’s degree recipients that place more emphasis on acquiring foreign work experience in order to later secure desirable jobs in their home countries and the U.S. as their destination to compete with other major host countries, such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. However, it may not be possible for universities to guarantee a job for international students after graduation in the U.S., home country, as well as global market. Therefore, student success for employment in highly-competitive markets lies in enhancing their network, capacity to represent their experiences and accomplishments in ways that conform to the competence profiles, additional professional development skills, and employers to acquire the necessary knowledge on work authorization options to better facilitate the career planning process of international students (Balin et al., 2016; Brown & Hesketh, 2004). From a related study, Nilsson & Ripmeester (2016) concluded that employment upon graduation is a drive for international students in their choice to study abroad. Thus, strengthening career services and adjusting the curriculum as needed to maximize student development with the skills and knowledge of greatest importance to prospective employers must be universities’ priority to continue to attract future international students.

Outcomes: Overall Student Satisfaction

Alongside the academic benefits, an international degree does not only help to expand the range of professional skills and abilities of students but also serves to connect opportunities proactively in taking ownership of their career leading to a more direct path to success for each student when they go back to their own home country. Surprisingly enough an international degree from a university in the U.S. tells employers in many countries that those students are

very likely to have a range of valuable personal qualities such as communication, professional writing, strong leadership and team management skills. In a way it demonstrates that they are ready to face challenges presented as another step on the learning path of life and prepared to think outside the box, constantly seek to broaden professional horizons, and willing to make difficult and unpopular decisions. Furthermore, studying in the U.S. will help gain a wealth of career-enhancing skills and experiences that include thriving in new circumstances, improving the current self-reliance, and pursuing subsequent educational endeavors including the decision to pursue higher degrees, which are likely to be recognized by employers all around the world (Loo, Luo, Ye, & World Education Services, 2017).

A growing number of international students have enrolled at colleges and universities to improve their future career opportunities, and to obtain experience that will eventually lead to employment. This growth is reflected by a substantial and expanding literature on the implications of student migration, value of international experiences, and perceptions of students on international education. One of these reflections is the huge gap between international students' expectations of academic and social support from university staff and their actual experiences. According to Bartram (2007) and Rosser, Hermesen, Mamiseishvili, and Wood (2007), many university staff and student service professionals serving international students may perceive such expectations as exceeding their responsibilities and believe that students should be more self-reliant in regard to building their own social networks. Their administrative role and responsibilities to address the needs of these students without access to appropriate training and information as well as the fears of being implicated in student complaints in a management culture that emphasizes full customer satisfaction have increased the tension existed between pressures and demands to support students. Through the analysis of a cross-sectional

survey data from 249 full-time bachelor, master, and doctoral international students at one public Midwestern higher education institution, Urban and Palmer (2016) found that students who were from South and Central America, East Asia, South and Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe had much lower outcomes related to their professional development than their respective goals. The study also revealed that many students did not participate in student organizations made up mostly of domestic peers and were not actively engaged in using career services as they believed it was easy to make friends with other international peers with insufficient support that they received from their institutions to engage in co-curricular activities. On the other hand, institutions that understand the needs, challenges, and contributions of international students and potential barriers to their academic progress, professional development, and social integration have the potential to positively affect international students' perceptions of higher education. Utilizing data from the 2010 University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey and a sample of 35,146 junior and senior undergraduate students (917 of them identified as international students) across 10 campuses, a study by Kim, Collins, Rennick, and Edens, (2017) on college experiences and outcomes among international undergraduate students in the U.S. found that international students experienced less gains than their domestic peers in interpersonal skills, cognitive skills, and civic attitudes during their college years compared to their domestic peers. Additionally, international students whose nationality or ethnicity was not included in the study reported less satisfaction with the quality of courses in their major, faculty instruction, academic advising and feedback on their work as well as fair and equitable treatment by faculty compared to domestic students. In the end, this analysis summarized the most positive and consistent effects on college outcomes as satisfaction with the quality of instruction and courses in the major, engagement with faculty during and outside of

class, and students' involvement in classroom activities, all of which scored lower compared to their domestic peers. It was suggested that "higher education academia and professionals need to pay greater attention to international student's psychological well-being, including college satisfaction" to increase their student outcomes (p. 410).

The experience of studying abroad comes with an adaptation process to new cultures, teaching styles, classmates and professors. Simultaneously, this unique experience exposes students to opportunities to improve communication, social, and academic skills, help understand other cultures and one's own, and increase self-confidence and independence (Ingraham & Peterson, 2004). A cost-benefits analysis of international education conducted by Chimucheka (2012) showed that the benefits of studying in South Africa outweigh the costs to Zimbabwean students for several reasons: English used as a primary language of instruction, internationally recognized qualifications offered by universities and recognized by employers in home countries, the country itself considered the most developed country in Southern Africa and broaden their own personal experiences, opportunities of employability in the country given to students, variety of study areas and courses made available, and modern technology facilities designed to make learning easy and meaningful. Using a pretested questionnaire to collect data from a sample of 80 students, the researcher found that 55% of the interviewed international students hope to benefit from educational and career opportunities in the country and 80 % of them wanted to enhance their international perspectives and understand cultural differences while majority of these respondents desired to improve their personal and intellectual development and transformation that includes acquiring a second language and increasing self-confidence in decision making. On the other hand, both financial cost such as tuition, living expenses, and limited funding opportunities and social cost such as crime, discrimination, and the longer

distance from families are raised by students. Although the inquiry was conducted in South Africa, the factors affecting students' outcomes are still applicable in most of the countries around the world accepting international students including the U.S.

The proficiency in English is a major reason for students to choose the U.S. as a destination country considering English has become the most widely spoken language in the world over the past two decades. In other words, having an excellent knowledge of English has become essential for success as it creates many opportunities in home countries as well as international markets and regions for these students. The best way to improve the language skills is to engage with materials and develop everyday conversational ability through teachers and students in a country where its primary language is English. Most universities in the U.S. offer English language courses specifically for international students, as well as study groups, pair – matching practices, and mentoring programs where students can practice their language training (Gatwiri, 2015; Held, 1999). The improved linguistic skills, coupled with connections they make while studying in the U.S., will always be of vital importance in any modern business when establishing international relationships and applying for jobs as well as going for internal promotions within the business they join (Ward, 2001). Likewise, in research and academia, maintaining and developing strong contacts help to build invaluable relationships with people from all over the world, which broadens international connections while having the opportunity to meet people that could turn into life-long friends and even lead to career opportunities, including internships, job offers, and business partners.

Living in a different country and experiencing a new culture will be allowing students to expand their worldview, build confidence and empathy, develop a cross-cultural awareness, and strengthen their sense of self while helping them to feel connected to others. By studying in the

U.S., they will be more comfortable communicating with people from different backgrounds, understanding and valuing their unique experiences, and establishing stronger relationships with them while decreasing the chance of feelings of inadequacy, frustration, anxiety and anger in a global world (Cisneros-Donahue, Krentler, Reinig, & Sabol, 2012; Milian, Birnbaum, Cardona, & Nicholson, 2015). “It’s a great opportunity to work on cultural competencies, like being sensitive to other cultures, learning how to adapt to new situations, and tolerating ambiguity,” Lombardi who is a director for the Master of Science in Global Studies and International Relations program at Northeastern University said (Shulsinger, 2017). Furthermore, studying abroad generally has the power to change the way individuals view the world and analyze problems. Sarah Han (n.d.), the Department of International Cooperation at the Korean Council for University Education, said “Experiences in other cultures have a tendency to help one think objectively about oneself and one’s home country, tolerate differences, and recognize and appreciate diversity” (“International advantage,” 2011). Studying abroad also will allow them to see and travel new places in the world they would otherwise not have thought of visiting. What is more, they will get to know their own region more intimately than ever before by experiencing a new culture that could totally be different from their own, which will highlight many unknown aspects of their own culture and help rethink stereotypes and misconceptions about their own culture (Yuan, 2011; Neff & Rucynski, 2013). As Heusinkvelt stated, ‘indeed the greatest shock may not be in the encounter with a different culture but in the recognition of how our own culture has shaped us and what we do’ (1997, p. 489) Thus, this new gained perspective of going abroad will be a great way to open their eyes to global happenings and to become worldlier. Through full academic and social involvement in college, students are likely to have

opportunities to gain a new understanding of their personal identity as well as feel part of a community and expand their interest.

While studying in the U.S. will offer many advantages, it is important to remember that deciding to leave a life behind to begin a new one in the host country poses real challenges. In addition to the challenges in the host country, a lot might change in the home country during their time away, which could be disconcerting and can make returning home a rather underwhelming experience. People who they were close to when they left — even those they kept in contact with during their time away — might be separated from them by the unique experiences, skills, and abilities they have each had in their absence. Because many people around those students may not have been to the U.S., it may cause them to feel misunderstood by them, so they do not necessarily understand their stories about daily and college life. Stimac (2018) claimed that “Family, friends, and neighbors may find it difficult to comprehend the changes” that international students have been through, which might add extra pressure on these students “to balance fulfilling old roles and breaking in new ones” (para. 5). Additionally, it may be quite intimidating to comprehend the changes in the job market or a new workplace after being out of the country for a few years. It is worth noting that, even within culturally and geographically homogeneous entities such as the European Union, national business practices may vary a great deal (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015).

Kettle's Theory of Student Engagement

Student engagement is widely recognized as an important influence on academic achievement and learning in higher education. Although it is often unclear exactly what is meant by engagement, it is a driving factor to recruit international students to Western universities as it impacts the amount of learning and personal development students experience. (Astin, 1984).

International students present unique background characteristics and are not homogeneous groups of individuals, therefore, they must be continuously encouraged by “recognizing the differences in learning style and previous education experience, providing bridging programs, and enabling staff to provide the interaction that many students are seeking” (Dalglish, 2005, p. 7). In consideration of this crucial factor, Astin (1984) offered to focus on student qualities and characteristics upon entry into an education institution as each student is with individual attributes, different family backgrounds, and various pre-college schooling experiences.

In her book, *International Student Engagement in Higher Education*, Kettle (2017) described student engagement as “a productive way of investigating international students’ efforts to mediate institutional expectations through their actions and interactions, driven by goals of appropriation and enactment, and larger professional and personal motivations” (p. 13). She criticized higher education institutions for their concern with the general student population and not focusing on international students when students from diverse background are disappointed by the carelessness with which their engagement is treated in practice. In agreement with Astin (1984), she believes that institutions have a responsibility to engage all students, however, they cannot do that by depending on sameness. She highlights the importance of ‘international consciousness’ in educators, as Lee (2015) did, because of the fact that these students suffer discrimination, which can be prevented through discriminatory acts against international students.

While international students make valuable intellectual, cultural, and economic contributions to host-country colleges and universities, Kettle (2017) is in agreement with previous studies that pointed out the issue around the process of ensuring that universally-mandated, standardized curricula and assessment can work with diverse student capabilities and

experiences, especially for students from non-Western cultures and using English as a second language (Lee, 2007; Evivie, 2009; Rienties et al., 2012; Young, Sercombe, Sachdev, Naeb, & Schartner, 2013). Kettle hopes to create new understandings about the elements that students recognize as salient in a new country and the actions that they take in response by drawing engagement together with social practice, which is reviewed below.

Social Practice

Social practice is the manner in which people participate in multiple and variable parts of life that involves an extensive array of elements such as activities, materials, times, people, roles, and values (Kettle, 2017; Penuel, DiGiacomo, Horne, & Kirshner, 2016): These diverse social elements are different but not separate as they work in relation to each other, therefore, shifts in one element leads to change in overall practice. By moving across diverse contexts with varying materials, co-participants, possibilities, and occasions for learning, people are able to become aware of new possibilities for action and arrangements for participation in practice. To succeed, they must somehow manage to combine their personal pursuits with the setups and scopes of those arrangements, which requires to adjust their contributions and invent new ways to participate in practice (Dreier, 2009).

Benefits of focusing on social practice cannot be underestimated. It provides opportunities to understand the way social life gets done by international students as the authorities on the experience within the prevailing social conditions and examine the strategies undertaken by them to process their learning and academic success. Furthermore, it allows a powerful reflection back to educators and administrators and helps them to understand what actually works and what does not work. Therefore, Kettle (2017) calls for a student-centered approach to international student engagement by utilizing a social practice conceptual model and

focusing on the productive practices that enable international students to engage in meaningful and rewarding academic and social experiences instead of defining them in terms of what they lack. With the aim of exploring the new ways of knowing, doing and being that students recognized as valued in the Western academy and their strategic actions to engage with institutional expectations, Kettle (2017) developed a model of international student engagement by highlighting teaching practices found highly effective by the six international students from Argentina, China, Mozambique, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam in her case study. These students were mostly in their first semester in a Master of Education program at a public university in a major Australian city.

By drawing engagement together with social practice, Kettle (2017) believes that new understandings can be created about the elements that students recognize as salient in a new country and the actions that they take in response. In other words, by recognizing student engagement as academically-situated social practice, students are considered as the arbiters of the international experience with the authoritative voice on what matters. Rather than positioning the students as subjects to dominant power-relations, the approach privileged their voices, experiences and actions through practices that they appraised as helpful and affirming. Thus, this approach not only enables to understand students' actions and experiences but also provides insights into pedagogies that students find effective in promoting their learning as well as assisting academic transitions.

Kettle (2017) states three elements that form the actions, knowledges, and experiences associated with engagement. These three dimensions of engagement are very similar to Astin's I-E-O as she focuses on firstly institutional antecedents such as English language proficiency, academic skills, individual expectations, and practices of the teacher to promote student

participation; then actions such as learning strategies; finally achievements such as the attainment of academic and personal goals, resulting from mobilising strategies, skills, and certain emotions within a task. Similar to Astin (1984) who states that engagement is directly related to “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 518), Kettle (2017) believes that “engagement inherently indexes the outcomes of people’s efforts” (p. 170). These elements have been summarized below:

1. Antecedents: Contextual conditions – academic practices and the mediating role of teaching in generating learning, participation, and legitimacy.
2. Actions: Strategies - behaviours, cognitions and emotions - undertaken by students to process their learning and academic success.
3. Achievements: Outcomes that derive from the actions of engaging.

By also proposing three elements (I-E-O) as Kettle, Astin (1993) aimed to assist universities to “understand which educational environments and practices are most effective and under what conditions” (p. 28). To do this, Kettle recommended to investigate ‘good practice’ to identify what international students regard as effective teaching for learning to provide ways of redressing inequitable practice. Therefore, adequate and useful teaching practices can act as examples and contribute to pedagogical change to promote engagement and participation of international students. Each theme operates in relationships. The conceptual framework for the study is presented in Figure 2.

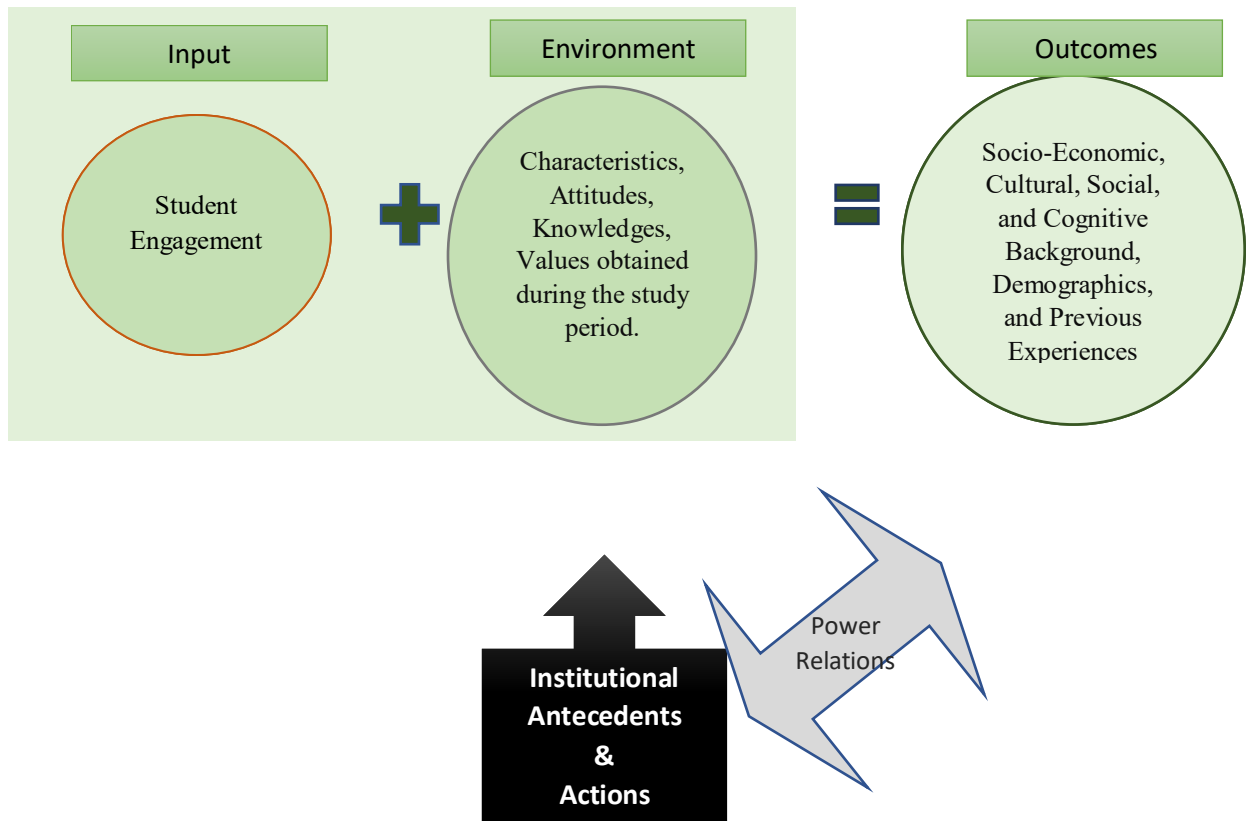


Figure 2: Conceptual framework for Student Engagement with an Emphasis on Background/Demographic Characteristics and Social Practice - Drawn from Astin's (1999) I-E-O framework and Kettle's (2017) concept

In addition to examining unique demographics, backgrounds, and previous experiences that international students bring as part of themselves to institutions, as Astin proposed, Kettle's concept assists with investigating the issues impacting engagement: (i) the institutional antecedents involving practices of administrators and educators to promote student participation and learning; (ii) the students' self-regulatory practices to action their own learning; and (iii) the students' achievements and outcomes including academic success and personal transformation that derived from their engagement.

Kettle's approach presents the students' views on achievement as it clearly shows the actions students take to enact the new ways of doing, knowing and being, sacrifices involved,

goals and expectations achieved, and if/how their lived changed in the meantime. Responding these questions require the students to reflect on their personal experiences. Therefore, international students who are differentiated from each other provide profound insight into or deep understanding of their unfamiliar social, cultural, linguistic, and academic conditions as the authoritative voices on engagement.

The Astin's theory assists to examine relationships between input characteristics and learning environments while Kettle's approach enables insights into students' favored practices and their actions in response; thereafter they influence the attainment of academic and personal goals. Careful considerations of three key areas are important for the elements intersect and influence each other: (1) A single input cannot wholly determine any output measure without environmental factors; (2) Outcomes alone are not enough to evaluate academic success and personal transportation; (3) Both (input and outcome factors) are still limited in their usefulness without also being aware of practices and actions of students (Astin & Antonio, 2012; Kettle 2017).

In order to exploit the potential in the changes arising from internationalization presenting continuous possibilities to universities, understanding how language, academic and social practices, pedagogies, and participation intersect and influence each other is a key factor. Comprehensive explanations of the new ways of knowing, doing and being that the students recognized as valued demonstrate approaches and methods to use when engaging students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and education background (Kettle, 2017).

Summary and Relationship to Present Study

As the review of related literature has shown, international students experience personal and professional growth while emotional, psychological and intellectual challenges are faced

during their time in a foreign country. Thus far, their acculturation experiences and academic challenges were mostly evaluated in an effort to standardize and conceptualize the procedure and support. However, the literature is replete with generalized studies on international students and their challenges, considering them as homogenous groups of individuals (Evivie, 2009; Dalglish, 2005; Welikala, 2015; Heng, 2019). Examining the phenomenon through a qualitative inquiry in this study highlighted both the uniqueness and the commonalities in experiences among these students on their perceptions of the college environment, levels of academic and social involvement, and personal goals as well as services and practices. The study also identified the need for the exploration of strategies undertaken by them to process their learning and academic success to understand what actually worked and what did not work for the participants.

This study specifically focused on the individual experiences of international undergraduate students attending a mid-sized private university in Western Pennsylvania and aimed to explore the perceptions of international undergraduate students to deepen understanding of the factors impacting outcomes of international students. The investigation offered additional insight into assimilation and integration of future generations of international undergraduate students for better academic involvement and social integration. The information gained by examining their lived realities together with overall satisfaction also helped to understand internal (financial, psychological, motivational, and emotional) and external (academic, socio-cultural, and career development) influences to facilitate better adjustment and acculturation practices for incoming international undergraduate students.

The next chapter discusses the proposed research methodology that will be employed to frame this study.

Chapter III: Methodology

Research Statement and Question

This study employs Astin's student involvement model and Kettle's (2017) student engagement approach to explore experiences of international students from their perspectives about integrating into a new academic and social setting while navigating the cultural transition process. Research points to significant differences among international students of different class levels that include, for example, the existence of fear among freshman and sophomore students that can negatively impact their final grades. This impact and anxiety, however, diminish as students get older (Astin, 1993; Khoshlessan & Das, 2017). That's because the challenges of international students change with time even though international students mainly deal with similar problems (language barriers, culture shock, academic and social integration, and transportation) from the first semester to subsequent semesters. However certain problems, such as homesickness and financial issues stay as major concerns (Cavusoglu, White, James, & Cobanoglu, 2016; Gautam, Lowery, Mays, & Durant, 2016).

This study's design deeply relies on the theoretical framework of Astin's (1999) student involvement model that is defined as the amount of physical and psychological energy that students devote to the academic involvement and social integration. The theory assisted to analyze the causes and consequences of background effects and identify the contributions to the overall satisfaction and experience of students. The theory helped explore the three key areas: (a) *inputs* that are students' demographics and background information, and any previous experiences; (b) *environment* that accounts for all of the experiences students have during their study; and (c) *outcomes* that include students' characteristics, overall experiences, and values that exist after a student has graduated from school (Astin, 1999). During the data collection and

analysis process, this theory was particularly important to understand students' academic involvement and social integration on campus and the barriers imposed by students themselves and the institution. Therefore, the study offered to create opportunities to assess universities' consideration in terms of seeking international student input to enhance services and programs.

The Input – Environment – Output theory works as scaffolding to integrate the related literature in building the visionary model demonstrating the factors affecting the overall experience of students. *Input*; demographics, backgrounds, pre-college preparation of students impacting student success, development, involvement, and retention in higher education. *Environment*; academic involvement, social integration, and support services, which include language and study skills group, peer mentoring, student clubs, multicultural counseling, social activities, and career services and increase student satisfaction through accessing support mechanisms and their active involvement in co-creation of value activities. *Outcomes*; students' characteristics, development, attitudes, beliefs, and values that exist after graduation as they are linked to variables (input and environment) mentioned above. Those variables are important to student satisfaction because the more involved a student is in college; the greater is the amount of student learning and student personal development will be.

In addition to examining unique demographics, backgrounds, and previous experiences that international students bring as part of themselves to institutions such as high school experiences, family background, age, gender, race, language, and cultural practices, Kettle's concept also helped to investigate the issues impacting engagement. By considering students as the arbiters of the international experience with the authoritative voice on what matters instead of positioning the students as subjects to dominant power-relations, new understandings can be created about the elements that students recognize as salient in a new country and the actions that

they take in response. Therefore, adequate practices can act as examples and contribute to promoting engagement and participation of international students.

Kettle's three elements that form the actions, knowledge, and experiences associated with engagement also assisted the study: (a) *antecedents* that are academic practices and the mediating role of teaching in generating learning, participation, and legitimacy; (b) *actions* that are behaviors, cognitions and emotions undertaken by students to process their learning and academic success; and (c) *achievements* that are outcomes that derive from the actions of engaging. This approach was helpful to investigate, as Kettle (2017) recommended, '*good practice*' to identify what international students regard as effective teaching for learning to provide ways of redressing inequitable practice. Therefore, adequate and useful practices were found to contribute to pedagogical change to promote engagement and participation of international students.

Thus far, acculturation experiences and academic challenges were mostly evaluated to standardize and conceptualize the procedure and support. However, it is important to have profound insight into or deep understanding of the experiences of international undergraduate students. Examining the phenomenon through a qualitative inquiry highlighted both the uniqueness and the commonalities in experiences among these students on their perceptions of the college environment, levels of academic and social involvement, and personal goals as well as services and practices.

The methods proposed in this chapter were designed to help answer the following research question:

- What are the academic, social, and cultural obstacles and resources of participants attending a mid-sized private university in Western Pennsylvania?

The goal of this research question is twofold. It seeks to not only explore the adjustment experiences of participants but also be able to see what resources and practices are found helpful and may need to be expanded upon to ensure that the needs of this population are met. This question used the word “participants” instead of “international students” because this study considers international students as individuals from varying cultures with unique challenges, therefore, avoids generalizations and offers to understand helpful and affirming strategies that suit individual needs. The aim can be summarized as follows:

- The findings of this research question provided profound insight into experiences of participants about integrating into a new academic, social, and cultural setting while informing readers about the elements that students recognize as salient in a new country and the actions that they take in response. Thus, the aim was not providing another repetitive generalized study to standardize and conceptualize the procedure.
- The findings offered additional insight into assimilation and integration of future generations of international undergraduate students for better academic involvement and social integration as they are the arbiters of the international experience with the authoritative voice on what matters.

Research Paradigm

A qualitative study was selected to address the research question proposed in this study. Creswell (1998) defined qualitative research as:

An inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The research builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducted the study in natural setting (p. 15).

The difference between quantitative and qualitative methods lays in the logics that undergird sampling approaches. As qualitative inquiries focus in-depth on relatively small samples, quantitative methods depend on larger samples that are selected randomly. Additionally, both have a different purpose explained by Patton (2002):

Qualitative methods permit inquiry into selected issues in great depth with careful attention to detail, context, and nuance; that data collection need not be constrained by predetermined analytical categories contributes to the potential breadth of qualitative inquiry. Quantitative instruments on the other hand, ask standardized questions that limit responses to predetermined categories (less breadth and depth). This has the advantage of making it possible to measure the reactions of many respondents to a limited set of questions, thus facilitating comparison and statistical aggregation of the data. By contrast, qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed data about a much smaller number of people and cases (p. 227).

Furthermore, the fundamental paradigmatic difference between them is that qualitative research is interpretive in nature and views the world as socially constructed while allowing researchers to understand perceptions of others and explore how people function to give meaning to their daily lives, whereas quantitative research views the world as measurable enabling statistical analysis (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Berg, 2007). Moreover, qualitative data provide crucial insight into the social and cultural phenomenon (Astalin, 2013; Tracy, 2013). According

to McMillan and Schumacher (1993, p. 479), qualitative research is a work of organizing data into categories to identify relationships among categories. As it implies, meaning and understanding emerge from the data collected through participants.

Conducting interviews with the participants enabled the researcher to understand and conceive of the perspectives of the participants to determine what factors affected international undergraduate students' adaptation to U.S. social culture and academic culture. This qualitative study also explored if participants, in fact, sensed that they were not understood nor seen as "unique individuals" while trying to fit into the new education system as their learning was influenced by the social and cultural factors. Because international students may experience problems such as homesickness, loneliness, financial issues, and stress and may not be able to show their full potential in their studies, exploring additional services and practices for international students' adjustment and well-being was also another aim of this study. Therefore, it was essential to use a qualitative methodology as it mainly focuses on cases that are rich in information and aims at capturing and describing the central themes that cut across a great deal of participant variation (Patton, 1990).

Strategy of Inquiry and Participants

The study examined the narratives of six international undergraduate students attending a private university in Western Pennsylvania and that used the parts of Astin's theoretical framework to explore each student's academic involvement, social integration, and acculturation process. The information gained by examining these realities of participants in the study helped to surface both internal (financial, psychological, motivational, and emotional) and external (academic, socio-cultural, and career development) influences that colored each student's adjustment and acculturation practices. As explained in the previous chapter, this study was

assisted by Kettle's approach that enables insights into students' favored practices and their actions in response; thereafter they influence the attainment of academic and personal goals. Therefore, the sub-themes did not only focus on challenges but also effective methods to provide ways of redressing inequitable practices and contributing to pedagogical change to promote engagement and success of international students.

The researcher employed a qualitative research approach to collect data. By interviewing the six undergraduate students, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of their thoughts, emotions, motivations, and choices. One factor to remember throughout the study was when working with other cultures, researchers are presented with unique challenges. According to Patton (2002), cross-cultural interviewing increases the chances of misunderstandings and skewed data as similar words may take on different meanings in other cultures, body language may be misunderstood, and some topics can be discussed freely in western societies while they are taboo in other geographical regions. These challenges required researchers to have tactics such as clearly wording and organizing questions, maintaining a neutral demeanor, allowing time for the participant to tell his or her story, and showing empathy (Brayda & Boyce, 2014). Email interviewing chosen for this study allowed the researcher to embrace these useful guides in dealing with potential challenges. Although face-to-face interviews are important for data collection, e-mail interviewing in qualitative research can be most effective to ease discomfort or awkwardness and improve the accuracy of reporting. Therefore, it was an essential tool to derive direct quotes and exact words from participants, identify themes, and capture the way they express their feelings, which will ensure validity (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015).

An empathetic interview was the tool of this qualitative research. Empathy, which was defined as the ability to cross the divide between different social locations by Chase (2005), between the researcher and participant is likely to result in richer or deeper research data leading to a more authentic representation of the other (Watson, 2009). In other words, empathy becomes a tool for achieving greater scientific objectivity to understand the action of the component individuals (Weber, 1968; Watson, 2009). The main goal of this method is to gain such an understanding of participants that others can empathize with them (Pontis, 2019). Moreover, focusing on human values through empathy for the people interviewed is fundamental to the method (d.school. n.d.). Mallozi (2009), another supporter of this specific interview method, argued that “the true self will be knowable without subjective interference from others” through empathic relations. Therefore, the focus of this study was on facilitating controlled and systemic gathering, logical analysis, and nonbiased, neutral interviewing throughout the process (Patton, 2002).

The fundamental key to empathize was to understand individuals. According to The Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford, the problems people are experiencing are rarely researchers’ own, therefore, one “must build empathy for who they are and what is important to them” (d.school, n.d. p.1). Thus, needs that people have which they may or may not be aware of can be uncovered while the emotions that guide their behaviors may be discovered. It is also important to know that empathy works best if researchers have the same or similar personal experience themselves to better understand the situation that participants are in (“d.school bootcamp bootleg,” n.d.). Therefore, the study had the benefits of having a researcher who also encountered new social and academic practices as an international student herself.

The method had certain steps to apply during an interview: Introducing the researcher(s) and study, sparking specific stories in others that was beneficial to hear, exploring emotions, and finally wrapping and thanking participants (d.school. n.d.). The steps are presented below in Figure 3.

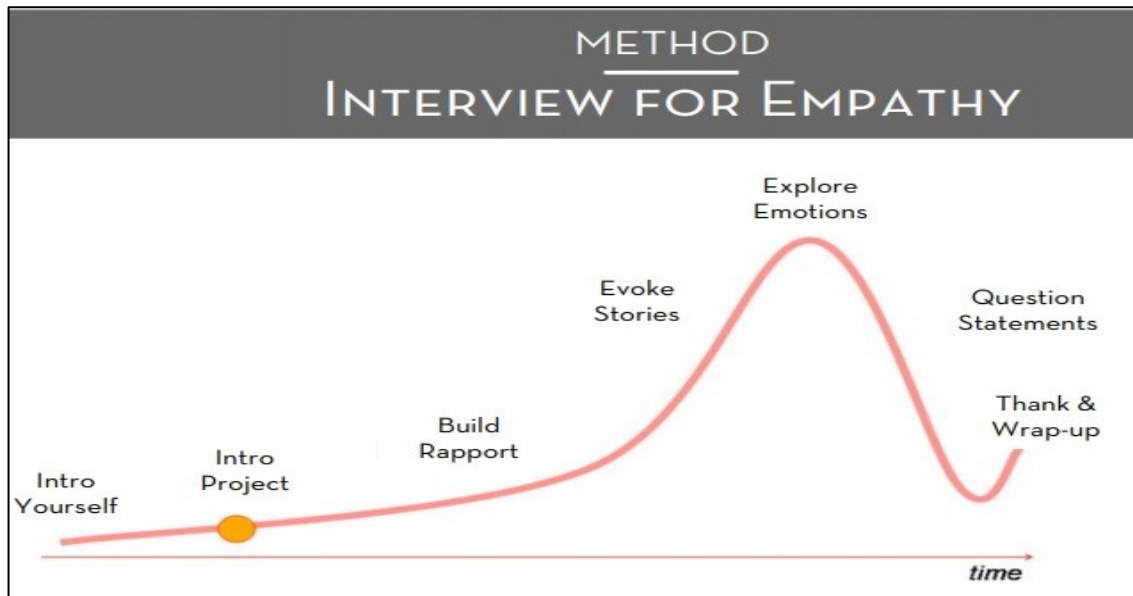


Figure 3: Steps for the interview for empathy method (Michael Barry, n.d.)

Certain consideration was made throughout the data collection process as it is required for this specific method (d.school. n.d.). For instance, the researcher asked questions for specific information related to the aims of this study and avoided sharing personal bias to what participants said by allowing them to express themselves freely. This was also made possible by conducting email-interviews. Some interviewees were asked to clarify certain statements through follow-up interviews to be true to the statements and experiences of them without controlling the interviews. Furthermore, the interview questions requested “stories, best and worst experiences, and concrete examples” as this helped “participants recall their memories and experiences” (Pontis, 2019, p. 94). Lastly, certain factors associated with this interview technic as they do with

many in-person technics such as being afraid of silence, therefore, suggesting answers to questions when participants pause were not a concern during the data collection process. Similarly, though some level of empathy may be involved with rapport building, which is one of the steps in an empathetic interview, rapport should not interfere with the neutrality of the interview (Seidman, 2006). Thus, participants in this study felt comfortable and were respected throughout the entire interview at their places of home or school.

The questions (See Appendix A) were divided into two categories (input and environment variables) outlining the following broad categories under investigation: Entry-characteristics of demographics, life prior to migration, and individual experiences about academic and social involvement, financial, environmental factors, and personal development as an international undergraduate student in a private university in the U.S., as well as relationships with family members, faculty and staff members, and classmates. The input variables were represented by the potential student demographic variables from the survey questions that may be used, including age, gender, ethnic origin, country of origin, accommodation, employment status, first language, and major. Moreover, the environment variables were represented by the student perceptions on the interview questions of the five categories, which represent their life prior to immigration, actual experiences in their academic program and campus life, cultural adaptation, and individual goals at a private university. Finally, the output of this study was the dependent variable of input and environment factors. This output variable was measured through the levels of satisfaction with academic and social life on campus.

A closing question “Is there anything else you’d like to tell me?” was asked at the conclusion of each interview. The survey and open-ended questions were available to complete

for two weeks. After the two weeks, the researcher analyzed the results of data collected from six participants.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations and principals in a research study are critical. In qualitative research, they are primarily centered on the guiding foundation of “do no harm” that can be done by respecting the autonomy and dignity of participants, minimizing the risks and maximizing the benefits to research participants, and protecting the whole community (CIRT, n.d., “*Ethical Considerations*”). To address and satisfy these considerations, all relevant ethical considerations were attended to accomplish a respectably ethical study. Accordingly, all students were able to choose to participate of their own free will and fully informed regarding the procedures of the research project and any potential risks. An explanation of informed consent was provided in a digital format. A copy of this document is provided in Appendix B. Participants were also made aware of the objectives to make an informed decision about their participation and informed that they had a right to withdraw from the study prior to submitting their completed responses. They also were informed that the study may benefit future international students in terms of appropriately preparing and supporting them even though they may not directly benefit from the study. As mentioned, participants were assured of confidentiality; hence, the use of pseudonyms, so no information was used to identify their involvement in this study. The researcher did not share information between participants and had procedures in place to protect the data and names of participants. Furthermore, participants were informed that no compensation would be paid for their time in this study.

Risks associated with participation in this study were limited, which were around the recollection of past experiences. Participants were expected to be reflective when responding to interview questions. As van Manen (1997) stated, reflection on lived experiences is always recollective; it is a reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through. Thus it was unlikely for the inquiry to cause discomfort as participants had already been through those experiences, which were to be explored through this study. In other words, the purpose was not to elicit unexplored thoughts and feelings of the participants. In case a participant experienced any emotional distress, the researcher would offer to reschedule the interview or withdraw the participant from the study with no consequences. Finally, all electronic data have been password secured, and the researcher is the only person who has access to the password. They have been stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home. All the collected data, transcribed notes, and consent forms will be destroyed five years following the completion of the research.

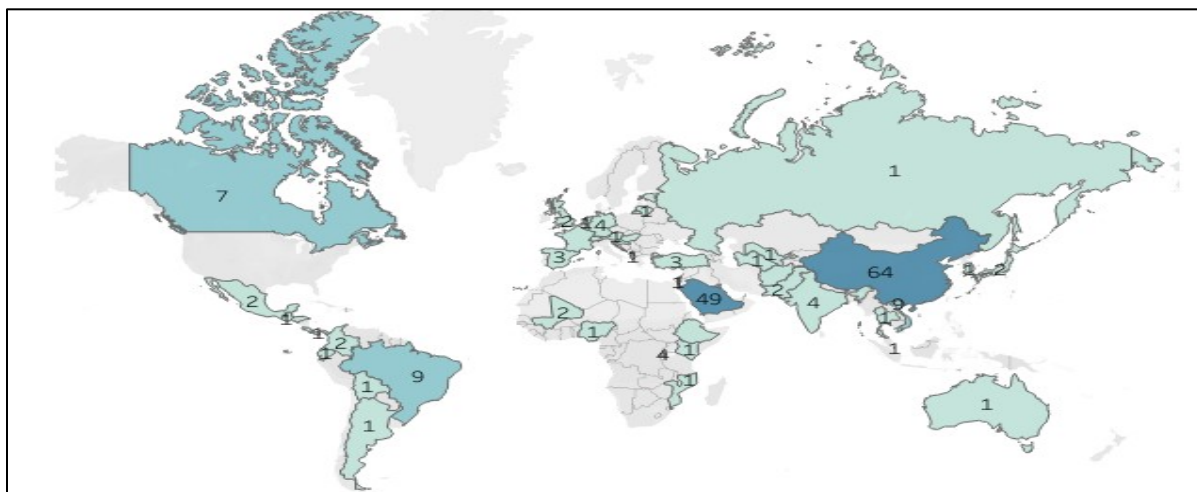
Research Site

This mid-sized private Catholic university located in the Western Pennsylvania was founded in 1878 to satisfy the demands of the children of poor immigrants. It has grown from its initial capacity of 40 students and six faculty members held classes in rented space to an educational and economic powerhouse comprising nine schools of study that serves nearly 9,500 students in the fall of 2019 on a 48-acre campus. This university offered 80 undergraduate degree programs, 90 graduate and professional programs, 20+ online programs, and 20 post-graduate certificate programs and employed more than 500 full-time faculty and had more than 93,151 alumni in 2019 ("Private urban university history" 2019).

The university requires prospective international undergraduate students who do not hold U.S. citizenship, green card (permanent resident) status, or refugee/asylum status to submit an

online application along with academic records from all secondary and post-secondary education, 3 letters of reference, and a personal statement. Also, students must submit their documents at least 6 weeks prior to the start of the semester, which follows up with an admission decision from the university in 2-3 weeks (“Center for Global Engagement” 2019).

The university works closely with around 700 international undergraduate and graduate students coming from over 85 countries all year round. In the Spring 2019 term, 208 of 5,822 undergraduate students were from other countries: 64 students from China, 49 students from Saudi Arabia, 9 students from Brazil and Vietnam, 7 students from Canada, 4 students from Germany, Rwanda, and India, 3 students from Ethiopia, Honduras, Spain, and Turkey, 2 students from Colombia, Costa Rica, Hungary, Japan, Mexico, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom, and 1 student from a variety of countries including, Afghanistan, Albania, Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Ecuador, France, Kenya, Netherlands, Nigeria, Russia, South Korea, Thailand, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were enrolled in the university (“Enrollment Dashboards” 2019). International undergraduate student enrollment by country of citizenship is presented in Map 1.



Map 1: International undergraduate students by country of citizenship (“Enrollment Dashboards” 2019)

Of all the undergraduate students (5,822) at the university in the Spring 2019 term, 79.75% were White, 4.88%, 12.5% were Africa-American, 3.66% were Hispanic, 3.25% were Asian, 0.12% were Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and 0.05 were American Indian or Alaska Native. 3.57% of the total undergraduate students reported as a non-resident alien (international undergraduate students) in the same term. Furthermore, these students mostly focused on business (64), Liberal Arts (56), and Natural and Environmental Sciences (18) majors (“Enrollment Dashboards” 2019). International undergraduate student enrollment by schools is presented in Table 1.

School	Level	Non-Resident Alien		Grand Total
		Male	Fem..	
Business	UG	36	28	64
Education	UG	1		1
Health Sciences	UG		2	2
Liberal Arts	UG	25	31	56
Music	UG		2	2
Natural & Env. Sciences	UG	8	10	18
Nursing	UG	1	6	7
Pharmacy	UG		2	2
University Program	UG	1	3	4
Others	UG	26	26	52
Grand Total		98	110	208

Table 1: International undergraduate students by school (“Enrollment Dashboards” 2019).

The Center for Global Engagement at this university was established to support international students who want to come for their education before, during, and after their arrival on campus. It offers the following support services for international students:

1. The many international organizations plan a variety of events throughout the year for international students, faculty, and staff members to meet to socialize,

including iftar meal, Latino bake sale, international fall festival, Latin movie night, and Diwali night with the Indian students association;

2. The Office of International Programs (OIP) offers a series of activities to introduce some of the American traditions and events to international students such as snow tubing, Easter lunch, and Christmas tree decorating.
3. The OIP encourages dialogue among diverse students by bringing together international students and U.S. students throughout the year including International Week - one of the largest events on campus.
4. “Become A Cultural Ambassador” program in which current international students who have already been through the process of settling into a new environment help prospective and incoming navigate the process. They are paired with these students to be their connection to the university as they work through the acceptance and settling-in phases of the admissions and arrival process (“Center for Global Engagement” 2019).

The department also has English as a second language program as well as study abroad and international exchange opportunities (“Center for Global Engagement” 2019). The International Students office also provides international students with orientations, immigration advising, and processing of documents related to academics, referral to student services, health services, employment opportunities, housing, and tax assistance (“Center for Global Engagement” 2019).

Selection and Recruitment of Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to choose international undergraduate students as participants for this study. Patton (2015) provides the following description of purposeful

sampling: “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry...Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding” (p. 264). This involves identifying and selecting individuals that are knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). Furthermore, there is no requirement on the minimum number for a qualitative design as it mainly depends on the validity and meaningfulness generated from inquiry and the observational capabilities of the researcher more than the sample size (Patton, 2015). In addition to knowledge and experience, Bernard (2012) and Spradley (1979) added the importance of an ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate and reflective manner.

Among various purposeful sampling strategies participants were selected through intensity sampling that involves selecting participants with information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena (Patton, 2002; Suri, 2011). The specific criteria for the participants in this study were that they would be international students in an undergraduate program, had more than 6 months of experience of living and studying in the country, and the native language of them was not to be English as the goal was to choose students with rich personal experiences. These strategies were to explore individual experiences related to international living and determine its impact on them.

Individuals were informed about the purpose of the study. Additionally, they were assured of confidentiality; hence, the use of pseudonyms, so no information was used to identify

their involvement in this study. Letters (see appendix C for recruitment letter) were sent to the prospective participants through the International Programs Office as well as an international student organization on campus. Approaches for recruitment were consisted of email solicitation to learn whether they would be interested in participating in a research study. Afterward, each participant was contacted, and the interview protocol was shared with the selected students to collect information via e-mail.

This study recruited only undergraduate students because as a group they are likely to be more heterogeneous than graduate students, to have arrived at a broad and overarching sense of purpose and experience more developmental challenges that could impact their adjustment to the US (Burkhardt, 2013). In other words, diverse international undergraduates – as opposed to those of a specific national, racial, or cultural group – were selected “to ensure that the conclusions adequately represent the entire range of variation rather than only the typical members or some subset of this range” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 235). Given their younger age, their maturity level might generally lead them to face more challenges than graduate international students as well as native undergraduate international students. In addition to the academic, social-cultural, and psychological changes, international undergraduate students also experience additional transitions, including the move from high school to college, typical daily routines, and from family life to independent living (Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Zhou & Todman, 2009). Existing studies related to the same or similar topic focus largely on graduate students or specific racial or ethnic groups such as Chinese, Arabic, Asian, or Indian students (Shen and Herr, 2004; Kim, 2011; Parkinson-Morgan, 2011; Gebhard, 2012; Alsahafi & Shin, 2017; Contreras-Aguirre & Gonzalez, 2017). Therefore, a study designed to have profound insight into or deep understanding of experiences of diverse international undergraduate students was warranted.

A limitation to this strategy was that by not selecting a more homogenous group of participants, I likely had the “conclusions adequately represent the average members of the population than (did) a sample of the same size that incorporates substantial random or accidental variation”(Maxwell, 2012, p.235). However, generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research; rather, the goal is to understand the unique experiences of individuals and permit precise extrapolation of results to defined populations (Maxwell, 2012). In documenting the perspectives of participants, there is no definitive truth or any established assumptions from which the researcher can begin (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001; Livesey, 2006). “Facts about behavior can be established, but these facts are always context-bound; they will not apply to all people, at all times, in all situations. They may not even apply to different people in the same situation” (Livesey, 2006).

Data Analysis

Schwandt (2007) described data analysis as breaking down a whole into manageable components to signify a search for general statements among categories of data. Patton (1987) indicated that three important steps occur during analysis: data are organized; data are reduced through summarization and categorization that entails classifying things, persons, properties, and events; and patterns and themes in the data are identified and linked. Although there is no definite beginning to analyzing data, LeCompte and Schensul (1999) suggested that it can be done as data are collected in the field, as soon as data are collected, or both while a researcher is still in the field and when a researcher is no longer in the field.

Colaizzi’s (1978) data analysis method was an appropriate methodology for this study because it focuses on exploring the essence and meaning of the experiences of the participants in their unique situations. It also enables new knowledge to be revealed and provides insights into

the experiences. Additionally, the Colaizzi (1978) method of phenomenology uses Husserlian phenomenology that helps to gain an understanding of the subjective meaning of everyday lived experience in the participant's language to describe the essential structure of a phenomenon in its analysis (Suryani, Welch, & Cox, 2016).

The process of analyzing the data involved the following procedural steps based on Colaizzi process for data analysis (Morrow, Rodriguez, & King, 2015):

1. Familiarization: The researcher organized the data collected from individual interviews to get a general sense of the whole and ideas presented. Then the data were read and reread until the researcher emerged into full awareness.
2. Identifying significant statements: Descriptions, expressions, and phrases of direct relevance, recurring ideas, and patterns of belief found in the phenomena of studying abroad were extracted from each transcript.
3. Formulating meanings: The researcher identified meanings relevant to the phenomenon that arise from a careful consideration of the significant statements by becoming closely attached to the phenomenon as experienced.
4. Clustering themes: The identified meanings were organized into themes and categories that were common across all accounts. A color-coded system to the initial set of materials obtained from interviews and documentary analysis was used to highlight specific themes/subthemes to perform a preliminary analysis and to form an understandable framework and associations derived from the language of participants. In the analyzing process, codes facilitate the identification of

concepts around which the data can be assembled into blocks and patterns (Catanzaro, 1988).

5. Developing an exhaustive description: The researcher wrote a rich description of the experiences of international undergraduate students. The researcher was careful to cover all aspects of the content concerning the aim (Burnard, 1991).
6. Producing the fundamental structure: The researcher condensed the extended meaning units, without losing content, down to a short, clear statement that captured only the key elements or essential aspects of the phenomenon (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).
7. Seeking verification of the fundamental structure: The researcher functioning as the instrument and analyzer, validity was tested through the convergence of information from different sources. In other words, different sources were used to build a coherent justification for the themes and ensure the validity of this qualitative paradigm. Furthermore, each stage will be performed several times to maintain the trustworthiness of the analysis.

As a way of conceptualizing the data, qualitative analysis was used to identify common themes that emerged from e-mail interviewing to gain a deep understanding on the nature of the barriers to studying overseas and alleviate psychological, social, and academic distress caused in their process of adjustment. In addition to that, demographic and background questions about the participant's age, country of origin, ethnicity, housing condition, employment status, gender, year in undergraduate school, and marital status were collected to better understand the identity of a particular respondent.

The data analysis followed Astin's I-E-O theory (1999) of student development for the interpretation of the collected data specifically focusing on the involvement with tasks, people, and activities that influenced the development of accumulation and relationship to student change determining overall student satisfaction. The analysis of data helped to understand their knowledge, skills, or attitudes regarding cross-cultural adaptability and allowed to formulate additional factors or variables that affected their ability to interact with those of other cultures. Additionally, the students reflected on the opportunities for academic preparation and social context of the university setting influencing the development of personal and professional skills to manage challenges successfully. By conducting interviews with students who had the first-hand experience as the primary research procedure, the researcher was able to uncover previous experiences, perceptions, and descriptions relating to cultural adaptability influencing input factors as well as levels of involvement in academic courses, co-curricular activities, and social development influencing environmental factors. Based upon Astin's I-E-O theory (1999), the researcher connected the input and multifaceted higher education environment on different levels as sets of elements that contributed to college outcomes including students' knowledge, skills, expectations, and values and beliefs changed or acquired while experiencing international living in the U.S.

Instruments

Patton (2002) succinctly stated that "In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the instrument" (p. 14). Therefore, the credibility of qualitative research findings of this inquiry relied to a great extent on the researcher's skills and competence. Additionally, the researcher's position of being an international student in the U.S. gave her the knowledge to be able to apply psychological theories and concepts to the current study. However, while similarities provide

common ground with the research participants, everyone's experience is different. Thus, being mindful of one's own cultural, social, and linguistic biases was the center of the inquiry to avoid making assumptions that may not reflect reality. Moreover, this self-awareness mitigated the possible impacts of preconceptions that may have tainted the research process through the analysis.

The electronic mail (e-mail) method was conducted for in-depth interviewing. An interview protocol was developed for this interview focusing on topics of interest for this study (see Appendix A), which was divided into two categories (input and environment variables). The input variables were represented by the potential student demographic variables from the survey questions and the environment variables were represented by the student perceptions on the interview questions of the five categories, which represented their life prior to immigration, actual experiences in their academic program and campus life, academic and cultural adaptation, and individual goals at a private university. Participants were required to respond to each question.

Several strategies were used to check the accuracy of the qualitative findings: One of them was the fundamental methodology of bracketing. It is a means demonstrating the validity of the data collection and analysis process by deliberately putting aside one's own belief under and throughout the phenomenological investigation (Ahern, 1999; Carpenter, 2007). Efforts were made to ensure that the philosophical methods held to guide the study were judiciously informed and the literature review supported the research study. Furthermore, an attitude that was open enough to let unexpected meanings emerge was adopted by the researcher, therefore, her knowledge, beliefs, and experiences would not influence the participants' understanding of the

phenomenon to accurately discover meanings in the data and describe the findings on the experiences of the participants. (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013).

The second strategy was purposeful sampling: It is selecting information-rich cases from participants who can provide insight into international living as an undergraduate student in the U.S. (Patton, 2002). To gain a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences focusing but not leading questions about their unique situations were asked (Munhall, 2007). Lastly, Colaizzi's method, as mentioned above, led data analysis to ensure that participants' experience was correctly interpreted. This portion of the inquiry was also scrutinized and validated by the researcher's dissertation chair.

Furthermore, member checking was also used to determine the accuracy of the findings and capture validity by taking the final interpretations, specific descriptions, and themes back to participants (Creswell, 2009). This was done by restating or summarizing the information given and questioning the participant to determine accuracy. Therefore, the step provided an opportunity to correct errors and have volunteer additional information for the accuracy completeness of the findings which then helped to improve the validity of the study (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Summary

The purpose of this study was to have profound insight into or deep understanding of experiences of international undergraduate students in the U.S. This qualitative study was grounded in the Astin's (1993, 1999) Input-Environment-Output theory and assisted by Kettle's (2017) student engagement approach. In addition to examining unique demographics, backgrounds, and previous experiences that participants brought as part of themselves to the

university, this study also investigated the issues impacting engagement such as the participants' self-regulatory practices to action their own learning. Moreover, this chapter included the methods and procedures used to collect, analyze, and validate the collected data. E-mail interviewing was used to gather qualitative textual data. Furthermore, the considerations of trustworthiness and ethics were discussed in this chapter. Chapter 4 analyzes the data collected and presents the research findings.

Chapter IV: Findings

The purpose of this study was to have profound insight into or deep understanding of experiences of international undergraduate students attending a mid-sized private university in Western Pennsylvania. The other words, the aim was to understand internal (financial, psychological, motivational, and emotional) and external (academic and socio-cultural) influences to facilitate better adjustment and acculturation practices for incoming international undergraduate students. Based on the intellectual goals, conceptual framework, and qualitative methodology of this study, one research question was formulated as a foundation for this investigation:

- What are the academic, social, and cultural obstacles and resources of participants attending a mid-sized private university in Western Pennsylvania?

The following chapter begins with an introduction to the six study participants with regard to their demographic information, followed by a presentation of research findings and results. At last, there is a chapter summary making conclusions on the main findings of data analysis.

Participant Overview

Data for this study were collected via six interviews with participants who are all undergraduate international students at a mid-sized private university in Western Pennsylvania and did not speak English as their first language. Table 2 provides an overview of the participants including (a) researcher-assigned pseudonyms, (b) gender, (c) age at the time of the study, (d) ethnic origin, (e) first language, (f) major, (g) academic year, (h) academic progress, (i) accommodation, (j) marital status, and (k) employment status.

The following participant descriptions have been arranged in the alphabetical order in which participants were assigned pseudonyms. These special interview accommodations were implemented to facilitate an adequate representation among the study population and to honor cultural sensibilities. As mentioned in Chapter 3 and recommended by Patton (2015), purposeful sampling was done in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study: “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry...Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding” (p. 264). Therefore; of the six participants, three were female, two were male, and one was non-binary. Moreover, all participants were between nineteen and twenty-four years old at the time of the study and selected from a different country, which includes Spain, Brazil, Honduras, Colombia, China, and Saudi Arabia.

Three participants spoke Spanish as their first language, while the rest did Portuguese, Chinese, or Arabic. However, all reported that English was the language of instruction in their undergraduate education. Participants were pursuing an undergraduate degree in engineering, business, media arts, or nursing and their overall grades were between A and B-. Furthermore, all participants spent between one, and four years as international undergraduate students in the United States. While three of them lived on-campus, the other three participants lived off-campus. All participants were either single or never married. Lastly, only two of them held a part-time position on campus, three of them were unemployed and looking for work, and one student was unemployed and not looking for work. Participants’ reported demographic information is reflected in Table 2.

Name	Gender	Age	Country of origin	Ethnic origin	First Language	Major	Academic year	Academic Progress	Accommodation	Marital Status	Employment Status
Adelina	Non-binary	20	Spain	Multiple races	Spanish	Biomedical Engineering	Third (junior year)	A	On-Campus	Single, never married	On-Campus/Part Time
Lucas	Male	19	Brazil	White	Portuguese	Accounting and Management	Second year (sophomore year)	A-	On-Campus	Single, never married	Looking for an internship
Nancy	Female	20	Honduras	Hispanic or Latino	Spanish	Integrated Marketing Communication & Digital Media Arts	Third (junior year)	A	On-Campus	Single, never married	On-Campus/Part Time
Oscar	Male	22	Colombia	Hispanic or Latino	Spanish	Finances	Final year (senior year)	A-	Off-Campus	Single, never married	Not employed, looking for work
Yuan	Female	24	China	Asian	Chinese	Media Design	Final year (senior year)	B-	Off-Campus	Single, never married	Not employed, looking for work
Zelda	Female	21	Saudi Arabia	White	Arabic	Nursing	Second year (sophomore year)	A	Off-Campus	Single, never married	Not employed, NOT looking for work

Table 2: Study Participant Demographic Data

Review of Data Analysis

Each of the six participants in this study was international undergraduate students who shared their personal experiences. Though each interview and each student were unique, the common atmosphere of each email-interview was a private environment with unlimited freedom to relate their narrative and the opportunity to read and re-read responses to interview questions before they were sent to the researcher, which was important to gain thoughtful responses the researcher was after. Furthermore, an assumption of a baseline level of familiarity in experiences between participants was kept in mind throughout the data collection and analysis process.

The themes and subthemes discussed throughout this chapter emerged from a thorough analysis of the data including multiple rounds of coding from email interviews and follow-ups with six participants. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Colaizzi's (1978) data analysis method was adopted to explore the essence and meaning of the experiences of the participants in their unique situations. In the first round of coding, the researcher read and reread until emerging into full awareness of each of the six scripts. The researcher then found and extracted descriptions, expressions, and phrases of direct relevance, recurring ideas, and patterns of belief from each transcript. Before organizing the meanings into themes and subthemes that were common across all accounts, the researcher identified meanings relevant to the phenomenon that arose from a careful consideration of the significant statements by becoming closely attached to the phenomenon as experienced. A color-coded system to the initial set of materials obtained from interviews and documentary analysis was used to highlight specific themes/subthemes to form an understandable framework. The researcher used a word processor software product (Microsoft Word) to confirm and document word duplication frequency and identify keywords, themes, and patterns, both individually and across aggregate participant responses to the interview questions. Particular attention was also paid to condense the extended meaning units, without losing content, down to a short, clear statement that captured only the essential aspects of the phenomenon. Following these two rounds of coding, four major themes and ten sub-themes emerged as common threads throughout the analysis and coding process for the six interviews, and these themes and sub-themes will be defined next.

Findings: Themes and Sub-themes

The big ideas and significant statements were categorized into four main themes coming from the descriptions, expressions, and phrases of direct relevance, recurring ideas, and patterns

of belief of participants as well as the literature regarding special needs and issues of international students. Additionally, an in-depth analysis was conducted to form the 10 sub-themes, which focused on notable specific characters underneath the main themes.

1. **“Land of Opportunity”** – the spectrum of reasons that participants mentioned for leaving their home country to study in the US and studying at this particular university. Sub-themes include: Motivation to Leave Their Home Country and Motivation to Study in the U.S. and at this particular university.
2. **“Challenges Overcome”** – the insights into participants’ favored practices in response to the challenges described. Sub-themes include: ‘Ideal’ Academic Environment, Exposure to Diversity, Leveraging Common Ground, and Personal Independence.
3. **“Reaching for the Goals”** – the personal reflections of participants on their international learning experience and long-term objectives of the participants. Sub-themes include: Reflection on the Experience and Thinking Ahead.
4. **“Wisdom Shared”** – the recommendations given by participants to prospective students to avoid, mitigate, and overcome challenges and applicable actions to address particular challenges. Sub-themes include: Lesson Learned and Are You Listening?

Table 4 below shows interview-highlighted findings concerning various opinions from participants who had a connection with the current research purpose. As mentioned above, from the six semi-structured email-interviews, there were four major themes that each of the international students touched upon and ten sub-themes that came to light in the analysis, which were also shared by all participants, though some of their perspectives were divergent in the sub-themes. Themes and sub-themes are defined below.

Table 4: Summary for Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes, Sub-themes	Adelina	Lucas	Nancy
Land of Opportunity			
Motivation to Leave Home Country	Better education system, longer-term professional relationships in a powerful country, and more opportunities to engage in another culture	Better education system, longer-term professional relationships in a powerful country, and more opportunities to engage in another culture	Opportunities to engage in another culture
Motivation to Study in the U.S. and at this particular university	Professional growth opportunities and the scholarship received from the university	Different external sources of encouragement and the scholarship received from the university	Different external sources of encouragement and the scholarship received from the university
Challenges Overcome			
‘Ideal’ Academic Environment	Language and academic assistance provided by instructors and students services	Language and academic assistance provided by instructors and students services	Academic assistance provided by instructors and student services as well as early preparation for college
Exposure to Diversity	Assistance needed with intercultural communication	Assistance needed with intercultural communication	No assistance needed for intercultural communication. Personality traits helped
Leveraging Common Ground	Learned more about the local culture	Learned about American sports and to be punctual	Learned more about the local culture
Personal Independence	Gained more self-confidence	Gained more self-confidence	Gained more self-confidence and embraced her own culture
Reaching for the Goals			
Reflection on the Experience	Pleased with the professional growth	Pleased with the professional growth	Grown academically and professionally

Thinking Ahead	Wished to further pursue education and hold employment in the host country	Wished to further pursue education	Hoped to grow more both academically and personally
Wisdom Shared			
Lesson Learned	Valued emotional support received from friends and goal orientation	Valued emotional support received from friends and goal orientation	Valued the support received from family, friends, and belief system
Are You Listening?	Attend events and surround yourself with other international students	Socialize, work hard, try new things, be nice, and go with the flow	Socialize and have an open mind

Table 4 (Continued)

Themes, Sub-themes	Oscar	Yuan	Zelda
Land of Opportunity			
Motivation to Leave Home Country	Better education system, longer-term professional relationships in a powerful country, and more opportunities to engage in another culture	Better education system	Better education system and longer-term professional relationships in a powerful country
Motivation to Study in the U.S. and at this particular university	A desire to study in the biggest economy in the world and the scholarship received from the university	Professional growth opportunities	Professional growth opportunities and the scholarship received from the government of her home country
Challenges Overcome			
‘Ideal’ Academic Environment	Academic assistance provided by instructors and student services	Academic assistance provided by instructors and student services	Language and academic assistance provided by instructors and students services

Exposure to Diversity	No assistance needed for intercultural communication . Personality traits helped	Assistance needed with intercultural communication	Assistance needed with intercultural communication
Leveraging Common Ground	Learned more about the local culture	Learned more about the local culture	Learned to deal with different kind of people
Personal Independence	Gained more self-confidence	Gained more self-confidence	Gained more self-confidence
Reaching for the Goals			
Reflection on the Experience	Grown academically and professionally	Pleased with the professional growth	Pleased with the professional growth
Thinking Ahead	Wished to hold employment in the host country	Wished to further pursue education	Wished to further pursue education and hold employment in the host country
Wisdom Shared			
Lesson Learned	Valued the support received from friends and belief system	Valued friendships with people from her home country or similar backgrounds	Valued friendships with people from her home country or similar backgrounds
Are You Listening?	Come with a clear objective and work hard	Socialize and network	Socialize and work hard

Findings: Review of Data

The following is a presentation of the data obtained from in-depth coding and analysis from semi-structured email-interviews with six international students in an undergraduate program at the same private university in Western Pennsylvania. Within each section, the major themes will be introduced, the development of the themes through analysis and coding will be described, the themes and sub-themes will be further explained in narrative form and direct quotes from the participants will be used throughout this presentation of themes. The following

themes and quotes depict an insight into the common experiences of international students while giving a voice to the different perspectives for careful analysis.

Theme 1: “Land of Opportunity.”

Each of the participants explained their reasons for leaving their home country and studying at this particular university and in this particular country. Although not all participants were equally introspective, reflective, and open in answering these personal questions, every participant shared the factors that drove them all out of their home country to study at a common location. The sub-themes in this section are: Motivation to Leave Their Home Country and Motivation to Study in the U.S. and at this particular university.

Motivation to leave their home country. Adelina, Lucas, Oscar, and Zelda preferred to study in the US for economic and educational reasons. They all explained that the country offered a better education system, longer-term professional relationships in a powerful country, and more opportunities to engage in another culture to have an exciting and enriching college experience than their respective home countries. Adelina, Lucas, Zelda described their decision-making dynamic succinctly, mentioning their perspectives, experiences, interests, and influences. Lucas clarified that he desired to “emerge in a different culture and have the chance to get a good education and a valued degree” that influenced his study abroad aspirations. Adelina wished to improve the English language skills along with receiving a better education: “I wanted to study in English and learn the language a little more, besides, research because the USA has been opportunities in that sense as well.” Oscar elaborated his decision-making dynamic deeply, “I knew that the education and the experience this country could offer me was of greater quality than the one I could obtain staying in my home country and also, I wanted to leave my home country to make connections from people all over the world.”

Nancy and Yuan also described an inclusive decision-making process directly influenced by opportunities that studying abroad would offer though they did not particularly want to migrate to the US. Nancy's utilitarian perspective linked her deep desire with her immediate aspirations to experience a different culture firsthand while earning a relevant degree abroad.

I always wanted to study abroad, whether it be in the U.S. or Europe. I think that being able to go abroad opens up many opportunities, not only for the degree, but also regarding networking, the things you will experience, and how being forced to become an independent affect character development.

In describing their relationships with family members and friends as well as the support that they received in the decision-making process, all the participants expressed to always feel loved and supported by their significant others in their international experience. They reported that their relationships with family and friends were very good and that they supported their study abroad decision and helped them in the process. Nancy, who enjoyed the freedom and independence she had in the US, noted that:

I have always had a close relationship with my family and my friends. I tend to make meaningful bonds with people, mostly through quality time. When I migrated to the U.S. my relationship with my family and friends became stronger even though we spoke less. I think that even though we spoke less the fact that it felt the same after a while made us realize how deep the bond and connection were. You also learn to appreciate people more when you don't have them around.

Motivation to study in the U.S. and at this university.

Each of the six participants expressed positive feelings towards their motivations for pursuing education at this particular university and in the U.S. in general. All the participants expressed their long-term desire to study in the U.S. Adelina particularly noted:

I thought it was a very nice country full of possibilities and that I was going to be able to fit in and make a lot of friends and good academic relationships. I knew the culture was going to be a little different, but I also thought that I was going to be able to adjust pretty quickly to all the circumstances.

Some of Adelina's comments were echoed in Oscar's comments as he expressed his desire to study in the country ever since he was six years old. He stated:

I decided to study in the U.S. when I was 6 during my first visit to this country and ever since it was a dream of mine to study in the biggest economy in the world and my parents were very supportive of this dream.

Furthermore, Lucas, Nancy, Oscar expressed their knowledge of the country that they gained through movies about the country or previous trips to the country. They created positive perspectives about their choice to study in the US. Lucas acknowledged different external motivating influences and sources of encouragement resulting in common study abroad interests. "Before I moved to the United States, I saw the country as a paradise, having my thoughts molded after Hollywood kind representations, and how strong it is internationally." Nancy also described her decision process that was strongly influenced by observation of the American culture.

American culture always seemed more open-minded than Latin American culture.

Usually, in Latin American culture there is a similar structure in every household but in

American culture there seemed to be more diversity. When it comes to the day-to-day there seemed to be more freedom when asking parents for permission and that sort of thing. People in the U.S. seemed to be more independent in that aspect.

In an agreement with them, Oscar also described his positive multifaceted deciding factors that were highly inclusive with both internal self-awareness as well as the influence of external sources for solidifying his hopes and motivation to study abroad.

Before I migrated was mostly influenced by the shows, Hollywood movies, and many trips I did to this country. In broad terms, I knew that life was not much different from my hometown (Bogota, Colombia) in terms that life in Colombia is very influenced by the American culture so I knew the differences, even if they are many, will not be very big overall. And mostly, I had a very positive perception of life in the U.S.

Lastly, all the participants agreed that financial support or scholarship they received was one of the greatest influences on their decision. Adelina explained that “the overall payment for the school was half the price of what it would originally be” after receiving “both a room and board and a tuition scholarship” by this particular university. Lucas echoed the same factor as Adelina, by explaining that he got the aid given to international students for housing in addition to a \$10,000 due to his good grades. Oscar was also offered a scholarship and a part-time job by the university, which helped him pay most of his expenses. He reported that the rest was paid by his father and a school loan. On the other hand, Nancy and Zelda disclosed that they received a scholarship from their government for their expenses. Unlike Zelda, who has full tuition, Nancy’s scholarship covered around 70% of her school costs. Yuan was the only one that did not receive any financial aids as she noted that “I don’t have any scholarship, and I am grateful to my parents to support me to study here.”

Theme 2: “Challenges Overcome.”

The second theme was identified from participants’ accounts of their personal academic experiences as international students at this specific university in Western Pennsylvania. The sub-themes in this section are: Ideal Academic Environment, Exposure to Diversity, Leveraging Common Ground, and Personal Independence. In this section, many struggles are identified and explored. As explained in the previous chapters, this study was assisted by Kettle’s approach that enables insights into students’ favored practices and their actions in response; thereafter they influence the attainment of academic and personal goals. Therefore, the sub-themes did not only focus on challenges but also effective methods to provide ways of redressing inequitable practices and contributing to pedagogical change to promote engagement and success of international students.

‘Ideal’ Academic Environment. Some participants described language barriers as one of the greatest challenges. Some participants, including Adelina, explained that language constraints may pose seemingly insurmountable hurdles to increasing academic achievement and building relationships. However, these participants also noted that instructors were able to creatively meet their needs and facilitate their classroom participation.

My interactions with instructors have been constructive, they have always supported me and helped me whenever I needed it. They were very helpful in answering questions during exams if I didn’t understand the meaning of a word that I didn’t know in English. I liked that I get to know the instructor because they know my circumstances and I can ask them questions about something that might be obvious for the rest of the class but that is not as obvious for me because English is not my first language.

Additionally, the nuanced descriptions of learning obstacles included applications of humor, as well as accents and word enunciation by faculty and classmates. Lucas described his experience (that were mirrored by Zelda): “It was hard to learn local slangs mainly because as a second language English learner, we only learn the hard-basic grammar, putting it to experience is totally different.” On the other hand, Nancy, Oscar, and Yuan reported that they did not have an issue when communicating with instructors or any general American audience in English. As non-native speakers, these participants had worked on improving their English-speaking skills through practice with their family, teachers, and peers before they moved to study abroad. Nancy noted:

Socially I’ve never had an issue reaching out to people, so I think that my upbringing really helped me with that. Linguistically, my whole family is bilingual, and I’ve been learning English since I’m 3 years old, so it was no issue for me. My high school prepared me well academically for the college experience and the friends that I’ve made throughout my life before college have helped me culturally understand American culture better.

In terms of adjusting to the educational system in the United States, their instructors contributed a great deal, all the participants reported. Because of the differences in the educational systems between their home and host country, they needed reassurances from their professors about their performance. Lucas added that different resources and certain projects helped his adjustment:

It was a harder transition than I thought at first, it is a very different culture from Brazil. In the US, the teacher actually cares about the students and I was surprised to know they had office hours. My performance has been pretty good considering I had a rough High

School for being a lazy student. I still dislike group projects though, but I enjoy receiving real-life assignments and apply it to the subject we are having.

Instructors being mindful of international students in their classroom and incorporating ways to help them adapt to the new educational system helped a great deal to the participants. Yuan noted: “I think the professors I've met are all very nice people, no matter who I meet with difficulties they are very enthusiastic and kind to help me.” This was also echoed in Zelda’s comment: “My instructors work really hard, and they are so helpful. They come to class well prepared.”

It is also important to mention that early preparation for college and personality traits of participants also played a huge role when confronted with academic challenges as they were adjusting to their new environment. These students remembered that they did not need much support and require many instructional adaptations even at the beginning of their experience. Nancy acknowledged, “The high school I went to prepared us for the college workload, so I had an easy transition. Since (University) is not that big I also managed to keep a relationship with my professors, something they also prepared us for in high school.” Additionally, Oscar expressed that he was always a student that did not “require a lot of help to accomplish” and “have a lot of experiences getting explanations from my instructors on my academic performance.”

With regards to receiving sufficient information and assistance from the academic advisors and student services staff, students were mostly pleased with the friendly and efficient service that validates their presence on campus. Lucas praised the staff for the services in assisting international students in different ways and went on to say that:

I have received great assistance since I got here, all the staff especially from the international office are great. I never really attended the writing or tutoring centers, but I have been to a lot of the professor's office hours and my experience has been great so far. It was not hard establishing good relationships with people from different backgrounds because I believe being courteous is pretty much universal. I have been to a couple of activities around campus like games and enjoyed them.

Nancy was equally appreciative as well. She noted that her relationship with her advisor was great, which made it easier for her to pick the classes that were the best for her. In an agreement with Nancy, Yuan expressed, "My advisor is also a nice lady. She always takes care of me and cares for my progress in my study. She also helped me to solve my own registered course chaos problem and was very patient." Zelda also noted that she had a great experience with her nursing tutors and acknowledged that they had done their best at all times to help with anything she needed.

Adelina and Oscar, however, called for improvement and provided some recommendations in their comments, though they were also pleased with the academic assistance they received from this specific university. Based on their responses, the on-campus resources should include diverse staff members and willingness to accommodate international students' needs, communicate cross-culturally during programs offered throughout the year, and offer professional assistance and guidance regarding academic and student affairs. Adelina expressed her emotions.

It has been nice for the most part, although sometimes American tutors don't understand that I might have more difficulties because English is not my first language and try to explain something that I already knew or treated me like I didn't know anything.

While not specifically targeted in the interview protocol, Adelina voluntarily expressed her feelings toward the treatments from “Americans.”

That sometimes makes me feel like I am stupid and that they think they know a lot more than I do whenever that's not true. Sometimes it also makes me feel like I am not worth it, especially in a class setting. In a social setting sometimes it makes me feel like they enjoy my company because they want to learn from my culture and my experience but sometimes it feels like they don't care and they think that I do things weirdly, even though I am usually only doing things that I would do in my home country.

Additionally, Lucas discussed the experiences of his friends who suffered from a lack of communication with their academic advisors that became a considerable source of frustration that permeated their study abroad experiences.

I have friends, international and Americans, that have had some troubles with their academic advisors when it comes to their academic requirements and it seems those problems come from a lack of clear communication from the part of the academic advisors.

Exposure to Diversity. The nature of everyday cross-cultural interactions that affected adjustment is characterized by Exposure to Diversity. This section included certain challenging factors, such as unfamiliar living circumstances, customary social behaviors, and differences between their cultures and the cultures of the university. Each international student described their struggles in learning and living within a foreign culture. Despite the struggles with cultural values and lifestyles, each of the participants expressed some sense of accomplishment in being able to navigate the culture and succeed at their university.

Although participants reported a desire to have American friends and believed that they could learn about American culture through friendships, they reported Americans usually were not eager to seek commonalities to bridge cultural divides and build relationships with people of other cultures. Adelina noted:

I feel like being an international student is hard at first because not a lot of Americans are willing to be your friend because we struggle a lot more to say a sentence and to interact with other people and not everyone wants to wait until we are able to say something. Also, not a lot of people help us when we need actual help and they are only there because they think it is “cool” to have an international friend.

In addition to making American friends, most participants pointed out that international students tried to construct successful adjustment by building a campus community that felt like home. They described a new intercultural environment that was created by students who participated in mutual recognition. Adelina felt that “It feels nice to be surrounded by other international students because they have the same circumstances and they are supportive of that.” This participant acknowledged, “They know better where to find things on campus and what are the best options to do certain things” in addition to giving a chance “to get away from the American culture and try to learn about other international students’ culture once in a while.” With another international student from Egypt, Adelina was able to “build a friendship ... with some American students that were nice.” This was also echoed by Zelda.

My friends are mostly from my own country and other countries. Americans do not really want to be friends with me or with us generally. For example, I am the only international student in my department and although my classmates help me academically, they do not

really take me in their circle. Maybe they are afraid of me because I come from a different culture.

She also noted, “I am so thankful for having my friends who are always supporting me. They are mostly Arabic and Turkish.” Oscar also felt positive towards having other international students around as having been a motivating factor to pursue an education in the U.S.

I feel that international students gave each other a lot of support here. We all understand that we have a different situation compared to American students, so we naturally come together and the best friends that I have here are international students too.

However, he still managed to make friends and enjoy different activities with domestic students. He recommended every international student to do so to be fully exposed to a college experience in a foreign country.

My greatest support here in the U.S is my roommate from freshman year. He is American and he has helped me a lot during my time here, since day one he understood all of my needs and has helped me every time I was struggling. I believe that every international student should find an American brother to guide him and to get the full experience.

Unlike many of the other participants, he felt that “being culturally different from the rest of Americans” helped him “to have a cultural exchange with the closest friends.” He, however, also mentioned that it was more challenging “to enjoy things that Americans do ... like their music and their sports, but besides that the overall experience has been great.” On the other hand, he mentioned having “a lot of Hispanics friends so the challenge has not been very hard.” Yuan also received her biggest support from other international students and interacted with them to get exposed to actual college life situations including housing, food service, recreation, and

contacts with college students and faculty members. She explained that “When I was in the first semester, I take ESL courses, many students from Saudi Arabia helped me recognize the campus life, and a series of events on the campus network, I am very grateful for their kind help.”

Lucas and Nancy expressed more positive views of learning in a multicultural and multilingual classroom, as well as, on an internationalized campus. He went on to express how important it was to have domestic and international friends to have the best experience in the host country. Like Oscar, he noted that “I have a group of friends from the US and a group of international friends. They are both great, they have supported me emotionally. I love them and they have been great to my experiences. They were essential for me to enjoy my time so far.” Though Nancy felt blessed to have had the opportunity to work as a tutor for the athletic department through which she met a lot of students and staff at University, she recognized the importance of having friends experiencing the same or similar situation.

I met my best friend on my second day at University through another international student that was friends with the person that introduced me to the university. From there we extended and began meeting other international students. It was truly a chain. I’ve received so much support from other fellow international students. I think that we are a community and we all know we have each other’s back even if we don’t really know each other very well.

Leveraging Common Ground. The nature of everyday cross-cultural interactions that affected adjustment is characterized by Leveraging Common Ground. This means that students and universities seek commonalities to effectively accommodate and manage external influences and intrinsic aspirations and emotions to work towards the mutual benefits and collaborative determination of goals. Lucas expressed that “the cultures are different and that I think this is

inevitable” therefore international students needed to adjust to American customs faster and more easily by bridging cultural divides and building relationships with international as well as domestic students. One of the adjustments he “had to make was timewise” as he observed that “people in the US are very punctual.” He admitted putting in additional effort to ease the process of adapting to a new culture as well as learn about local customs and values. Learning about sports was a significant catalyst for him. According to Lucas, sports helped him to make a lot of American friends.

One of my best friends here is a sports enthusiast so talking to him made me understand better the rules and see the fun in pretty much every American sport. This interaction was essential because (this city) is a great sports town and now I can talk about any sport with anyone because I learned about them through my friend.

This suggests that focusing on a shared interest is likely to shift the focus away from cultural and language differences and result in not only effective intercultural-interaction but in peer acceptance and friendship formation. However, another participant, Oscar, felt “very passionate about soccer” but it was very hard to “find people that like it” and he did not believe that he would ever “be able to like American sports like basketball or football.” He also went on to say that he never “like the music people (his) age listen to in America.” These two differences continued to impact his involvement, particularly in social events. Oscar also wished that “the academic advisors could help more international students with employment opportunities for them because sometimes it feels they are more of an obstacle than a helpful hand when it comes to employment opportunities for international students.” Despite insufficient guidance and severe regulations surrounding foreign students’ ability to work that he noted, he was hopeful and saw the challenges as an opportunity to grow to increase his chances for employment in the U.S.

One challenge in my everyday life here has been my ability to work in the U.S with all the regulations that are in place for international students. These regulations are more severe than I originally thought and that has been a big challenge here. In order to meet this challenge, I try to see these regulations as an opportunity to grow and I know that to have the same opportunities as an American citizen I need to work harder and that is something that motivates me.

Adelina added her perspective regarding this inherent conflict in the notion that students must balance the construct of her obligation to adjust to several (potentially conflicting) expectations placed upon them resulting from studying in a foreign country. Adelina noted:

I didn't expect people to not want to be your friend because it is a little harder to talk to you and I didn't expect it to be so hard to make friends in American society because they are a little less open-minded than the culture I come from.

Working toward a common goal for an extended time shifted the focus away from differences and balanced Adelina's perspectives. "What keeps me going is the thought that I came to the USA to have a better education and I hold on to the friends that I already have and appreciate, and I don't let mean people bother me anymore." As time went on, Adelina noticed that "People in the USA are not very affectionate and that they do a lot of small talks and don't really want to engage in conversations whenever it is not convenient for them." The very same description of people was also shared by Nancy who successfully navigated, accommodated, and balanced this extrinsic cultural pattern in American life. She acknowledged:

I'm getting used to being more private because people are very conservative. I'm not sure if it is a cultural thing or if it's just the way I am but that has been very different for me, both physically and emotionally. People are not very affectionate.

The similar leveraging process to adjustment applied to Yuan and Zelda as well. She believed that "people here are very enthusiastic" and often noticed "strange passers-by in the street" to "praise" certain things, "such as (people's) clothes" so she learned to do so." Zelda also added, "I am living in a different culture with different people. However, this culture gives me experience in how to deal with different kinds of people." She "loved" challenges as she believed "life without challenges is not interesting" and felt "so thankful for the good and the bad of the experience because (she) can learn from the bad and the good."

Personal Independence. One of the most common goals in addition to academic and cultural achievement referenced across study participants was the desire for personal independence. Each of the participants described certain personal-growth opportunities that came with their international learning experiences. They mostly included learning about new perspectives and how to adapt to new situations, developing cross-cultural awareness and valuable life skills such as self-confidence and adaptability, and improving career development and certain skills that help you connect with others. They were pleased with these benefits of studying abroad, though they came with unique challenges. Adelina said:

Undergraduate life is very busy, more than I expected. Because you have a lot of school work that you have to do every week and in addition to that you are supposed to be involved in multiple organizations that are relevant to your major and other activities that will make you a better candidate for future education or job opportunities.

Lucas simply agreed with Adelina's statement on being "busy with school work" and "studying a lot during the week" in order to "get a good job" back in his home country. He expressed that "School is actually hard, so my main challenge was adjusting my studying schedule and do the study, the exact opposite of my high school which was kind of easy. I thought it would be just an extended version of High School and it is clearly not." He also added that he tried different approaches such as "attending campus events like career fairs, going to parties with (his) friends, working for (University) athletics, and joining few clubs around campus" to enhance his global network as well as enjoy his time in the host country. According to another candidate, Nancy, whose international experiences have shaped her to be able to see problems differently admitted that "(she) was a bit shy at first because (she) didn't quite know the people (she) was working with" but she learned to deal with issues as the time went on.

I've had a lot of life-changing moments during my college experience thus far. I am not the same person that came into University and all the change I've been through has been positive and it has made me love the person I am today. I've been able to meet so many people that had touched me deeply and that I know have my back. I absolutely love my life as an undergraduate student. It is unpredictable, and every day is different. I've learned so much about myself and others, and obviously academically. I like it a lot.

Moreover, she expressed that her international experience created a strong positive influence on his identity.

I think the biggest challenge has been being able to figure out issues without my family or my friend's help. I've always had a very good support group behind me, so I have definitely had to become more independent.

Lastly, she learned to embrace her identity and uniqueness and was the only participant to describe proud in her country and culture.

I think my relationship with other Latin American people made me feel comfortable being myself and it made me feel even more proud of being Latin American. I learned to accept my accent and to show off my culture even more.

Their experiences were echoed in Lucas's account. He went into detail about his personal growth and independence. It was clear that his goal to "get a job" and eventually "have (his) own company in the U.S." required significant studying, adapting, and networking. He explained his approach to "learn as much as (he) can and create as many connections as (he) can in detail:

My life as an undergraduate student has been centered around my studies, during my almost 4 years at Duquesne I have rarely missed a class and my objective has been to learn as much as I can so I can take full advantage of this opportunity. Beside my studies, I have been very active with multiples jobs, I have had multiples jobs during my time here and a couple of internships. Besides that, I also attend some extracurricular activities, I go to the gym, I go to the church and maintain an active social life.

Finally, Yuan and Zelda said that they were not as social as they wanted. Yuan admitted that "I think I still have regrets because I don't really participate in activities." However, her time here in this new city made her feel "more independent and confident" and that she would not "regret ever in (her) life" for studying abroad. Zelda also added, "Life is lonely here sometimes because I lived with my family back in Saudi Arabia, but it has thought me to be more independent" and this experience "helps me to know better about other cultures and be more respectful for all the cultures." She lastly shared that "My life is amazing here as long as I am

achieving my goal that is to obtain a good education. It sometimes gets hard but every day I learn something new.”

Theme 3: “Reaching for the Goals.”

The third theme was generated from the personal reflections on international learning experience and discussion on the long-term objectives of participants. This theme explores the participants’ perceived impact on their learning experience, their long-term goals, and how their experience would help to achieve their goals. The focus of the theme is on the personal, social, and determined natures of the participants. The sub-themes in this section are: Reflection on the Experience and Thinking Ahead.

Reflection on the experience. All participants came to the country with their own goals, though all the participants agreed that their priority was to receive a good education. Adelina who was majoring in Biomedical Engineering believed that her goals did not have to remain as dreams because she would “be able to find the resources and tools to do some research and actually make some devices” that are “simple and not too expensive” to help people that were not very fortunate all around the world. On the other hand, Nancy valued her personal growth more as she described that her “biggest accomplishment” was “being able to become an independent person.” She noted, “I’ve had my struggles and I’ve had to overcome them myself so that has helped me out a lot to become who I want to become.”

Oscar, like others, shared that his international learning experience helped him both academically and professionally. He noted:

I believe that I have learned a lot of things both inside my classes and outside of them.

My roommate owns his own business and I have learned a lot about his experience and that will help me a lot in the future when I start my business. Also, I eventually want to

go back to Colombia to share my experiences there to help my country grow. Finally, all the connections I have made here will help in the future.

Yuan and Zelda said that they have improved their skills not only academically but also culturally. They considered pursuing their education further to get their master's degree to continue to learn. Lastly, Lucas mentioned that his valuable education would "count a lot in Brazil" and it would give him an advantage over people that went to college there. He, like Yuan and Zelda, also wanted to receive his master's degree before returning home. Finally, none of the participants, except Lucas, considered not completing their study at any point. Lucas acknowledged that he thought about not completing it "especially at the beginning because (he) was scared. (He) would regret (his) choice if (he) moved back to Brazil" but now he is confident that he will be able to finish it.

Thinking Ahead. All the participants had long term goals that they were working towards and shared them in great detail with the researcher. Adelina, Lucas, Yuan, and Zelda wanted to further pursue their education. Lucas shared, "My main goal is to graduate and try to do a master's hopefully in (University) or in this city. I plan to go back to my home country and get a good job there and maybe start a family." Moreover, Yuan also said that her goal is to become a bilingual journalist back in her country. While Lucas and Yuan only wished to keep their time in the country limited to getting their either master's or doctorate degree, Adelina and Zelda desired to stay and work after graduation. However, they were concerned about obtaining authorization to be employed in the U.S. Adelina noted:

I want to be able to get a doctorate degree and be able to do things that will be helpful to humanity and to help developing countries with the infrastructures. I want to make simple

and not too expensive devices so I can then bring them to other countries and make their life easier.

Then, she expressed her concern about receiving work authorization that permits international students to engage in part- or full- time employment in their field of study. However, they also stated that they did not have enough knowledge about work authorization options. “I would like to ... work in the USA but for that I would have to get an authorization to work and I don’t know exactly how long that process will take.” Zelda also expressed the same concern as Adelina, “I do not now actually how I will be working here because I am not a US citizen, but I would love to gain some international work experience before I go back home.”

Oscar also wished to hold employment in the host country. Although he was hopeful about it, he was also aware of the immigration regulations that restrict employment as well as the economic recession caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

My objective is to learn as much as I can and to create as many connections as I can. My professional goal, in the short term, is to eventually get a job that will offer me a sponsorship and later a green card so I will always have the option to come to the U.S. My long-term objective is to have my own company, that is also one reason why I came to this country because it is easier to start a business here than in Colombia.

He also provided an update on his progress along with concurrent emotions of apprehension and determination.

So far, I think my plans are going well, with my grades and my experience I think I made myself a good candidate for companies here in the U.S and even if it is hard to have a job that will give me a green card I think I will eventually have it. I do not think my legal

status will make this impossible but I do believe that the economic conditions, the recession caused by the coronavirus, will make finding a job even harder and maybe my plans will now take longer than expected but I still feel confident about my plans.

Finally, Nancy wanted to “do much more to gain as much experience as (she could) and to network and become (her) own person.

Theme 4: “Wisdom Shared.”

International learning experiences led to knowledge and understanding that study participants shared with prospective and newly committed students following in their footsteps. These recommendations included practical suggestions to avoid, mitigate, and or overcome challenges and applicable actions to address particular challenges faced by international students. The sub-themes in this section are: Lesson Learned and Are You Listening?

Lesson Learned. One of the best lessons Adelina learned to have the ideal international learning experience was surrounded by friends made in the host country as they were a great emotional and social support. However, Adelina also added that it was important to disengage “within a group of people if sensing any bad vibes.” Furthermore, what kept Adelina going was “the thought that (she was) in the USA for (her) education and everything else (was) secondary” when facing challenges. These supporting and pushing factors were also supported by Lucas’ comments. He remembered to “socialize enough and engage in groups especially on campus” in addition to studying hard to earn his degree.

Nancy emphasized the importance of personal qualities when facing problems throughout her interview. She noted:

I am an extrovert and I get my energy from interacting with other people. I love the diversity in personalities and cultures that I have encountered during my time at (University). I feel like if I weren't such a people person, my experience would have been miserable. It is important to be able to keep an open mind. Unfortunately, not many people have the luck to have been brought up in that way.

Like others, she also relied on her support systems and explained, “family, friends, and belief system have played a big part in my success. They have worked as crutches for me. It helps me find my balance and keep moving forward.” Besides studying hard and keeping his grades up, what worked for Oscar was having a social life. He elaborated upon several socializing factors that came into play.

I have joined many student organizations like a business fraternity and the (University) Asset Management team. I am also part of a soccer group where we get together every Friday afternoon to play some games. I also feel that I have created a diverse group of friends. I am friends with almost all the Latino community in (University) and also because my roommate is in a social fraternity I have a lot of American friends and sometimes I try to bring both groups together to hang out and create links between both communities.

Aside from his education and social life, he tried to “attend mass every weekend.” He explained that “(his) connection with (his) religion has helped (him) a lot here ... especially during the hard times.” On the other hand, Yuan and Zelda chose to find their comfort zone in making friends, mostly with people from their home country or similar backgrounds. They believed that they did not do enough to gain “life and work experience” as they described it as “insufficient” and admitted that they needed more knowledge about society.

Are You Listening? One of the simplest pieces of study abroad wisdom was shared by Adelina who encouraged prospective and newly committed students to attend different events and surround themselves with other international students to receive the best emotional support. Adelina noted:

I would say try to go to the activities that the university organizes even if it is alone and try to talk to some of the international students and be friends with them so you know they will be there in case you are sad or stressed.

Lucas also highlighted the importance of being social, though he also warned incoming students to accept prevailing trends and forces and be relaxed rather than trying to alter or control everything. He explained:

Go with the flow, you can't control everything, enjoy, work hard, don't be scared to try new things, be nice and people will be nice to you, make friends and stick to them. You are all in the same boat. HAVE FUN.

Lucas's advice was echoed in Nancy's. "You have to keep an open mind and try to get out there and out of your comfort zone." Despite the fact that she was being "very shy" at first and intimidated by "the lack of diversity at University," she still put a lot of effort into socializing and learning through socialization. She remembered:

During social events and academic activities, I've had the opportunity to meet a lot of my best friends and people who have been really impactful in my life. I've had the opportunity to meet a lot of people from different cultures through the International Student Organization, for which I am president. It has opened my eyes and my heart to so many new things that I could have never experienced if it weren't for these opportunities.

Yuan's advice was no different from the other participants. She recommended prospective and newly committed students to "participate in more group activities and community activities, socialize more, and increase networking." Furthermore, Zelda also informed incoming and prospective students about it being "hard in the beginning." Then she continued, "However, it is the best experience you will ever have. I recommend studying abroad because it makes you a different and stronger person."

Oscar was the only participant who expressed that study abroad was not for everyone. Although being determined to accomplish a mission was important, he admitted that it sometimes may not be enough and that is fine. He explained his perspective:

My biggest advice is to come with a clear objective in mind and make all of your important decisions to accomplish that objective. Having an objective in mind will help during a hard time to stay focus and motivated. Also, that sometimes plans change and that is fine and that if they find out that they do not like it here is ok to come back, this is not for everyone.

Summary

Chapter 4 included the findings of this interview study's exploration into experiences of international undergraduate students attending a mid-sized private university in Western Pennsylvania. The four major themes interpreted from the findings included the participants' internal (financial, psychological, motivational, and emotional) and external (academic and socio-cultural) influences to facilitate better adjustment and acculturation practices regarding (a) processes, (b) challenges overcome, (c) goals, and (d) personal recommendations to prospective and newly committed students during study abroad experiences along with each theme's relevant

subthemes. The next chapter presents discussions, conclusions, and recommendations for further study.

Chapter V: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Applying a qualitative explanatory research design, the purpose of this study was to have profound insight into or deep understanding of experiences of international undergraduate students attending a mid-sized private university in Western Pennsylvania. A thorough analysis considers both upstream and downstream elements of their experiences, including decision influences, challenges, goals, and impacts. Astin's (1984) theory of student engagement assisted the study to consider different elements (Input, Environment, and Outcomes) to see the full picture. These elements assisted understanding of the relationship among backgrounds, educational practices, and outcomes. Furthermore, Kettle's (2017) student-centered approach provided opportunities to understand the way social life gets done by international students as the authorities on the experience within the prevailing social conditions and examine the strategies undertaken by them to process their learning and academic success. This allowed the researcher to understand what actually worked and what did not work for the participants. The research data were gained from six undergraduate international students and purposefully selected diverse international students to answer the research question:

- What are the academic, social, and cultural obstacles and resources of participants attending a mid-sized private university in Western Pennsylvania?

The main research findings rose concerning internal (financial, psychological, motivational, and emotional) and external (academic, socio-cultural, career development) influences. Four results emerged from the findings, which were presented in the discussion section of this chapter: (a) Multiple factors played an important role for study abroad decision making; (b) Despite the common several obstacles, each participant experienced his/her environment differently; (c) Four elements were indicated as key motivators during the study

abroad experience; and (d) Staying both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated is advised by the participants for the ideal learning experience in the host country. They were interpreted with the relevant literature. Next, this chapter presents the conclusions combined with the results from email interviews in Chapter 4. Lastly, this final chapter explains the limitations and states the recommendations for further study.

Discussion

Four results emerged from the findings: (a) Multiple factors played an important role for study abroad decision making; (b) Despite the common several obstacles, each participant experienced his/her environment differently; (c) Four elements were indicated as key motivators during the study abroad experience; and (d) Staying both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated is advised by the participants for the ideal learning experience in the host country.

One: Multiple factors played an important role for study abroad decision making.

Each path differed regarding the source and degree of internally and externally generated influence and was collected under two sub-themes: (a) Motivation to leave their home country and (b) Motivation to study in the U.S. and at this particular university. Four main reasons to study abroad noted by most participants are as follows:

- A better educational experience
- Higher levels of engagement in cross-cultural interactions
- Be more marketable to employers
- Financial support received from the university

All the participants stated that the opportunity of having rich educational experience and developing cross-cultural mindedness were two significant internal forces that influenced their decision to pursue their education in another country. This is reflected in prior research by Obst

& Forster (2007), Twombly, Salisbury, Tumanut, and Klute (2012), Zhao (2013), Wang, Harrison, Cardullo, and Lin (2018), and Aldawsari, Adams, Grimes, and Kohn (2018) regarding the unique advantages of studying abroad, particularly in the U.S. including studying at high-quality institutions, choosing from a broad range of programs, improving English skills, and making friends from all corners of the world.

Becoming more desirable to future prospective employees was another internal factor that was brought up by five out of the six participants during the data collection process. The opportunity to study in ‘the world's most-powerful country’ was also very appealing to half of the participants who hoped to find employment after graduation to get the international experience sought by many employers. Spencer-Rodgers (2000), Hephner-LaBanc (2010), and Nunes and Arthur (2013) reflected this in their research. They reported that international students were heavily driven to study in the U.S. to improve employment prospects. Regardless of where they came from, they hoped to have a competitive advantage in today's world after graduation. The findings of this study support Spencer-Rodgers’ (2000) conclusion that her study participants indicated the greatest need for work experience, followed by job-search skills, and finally, career-planning activities. Balin et al., (2016) also stated that “College students and their families are increasingly questioning the return on investment of a college education, which is often measured by successful attainment of a satisfying job upon graduation.” Similar to previous research, one of the reasons for the participants to study abroad lies in enhancing their network, gain more experiences and accomplishments in ways that make them more competitive in the job market. They also placed a strong emphasis on securing desirable jobs either in their home countries or in the host country.

Receiving financial support from this particular University, their government, or family members also played a big role in their decision to study abroad. Five of the six participants reported receiving a considerable amount of financial aids from the University, which helped them substantially. Choudaha and the University of California (2018) explained that the cost of tuition and fees is one of the most important factors impacting students' decision to study at U.S. institutions. Therefore, the lack of affordability and the absence of scholarships may be the main motivating factors to leave their home country (Schulte & Choudaha 2014).

One important finding that this study brought to light with the two participants was the idea that they had extra concerns about the future state of their lives. Adelina from Spain noted that she wanted to “be able to do things that will be helpful to humanity and to help developing countries with the infrastructures.” Then, she revealed that her education in the U.S. will give her a chance to “find the resources and tools to do some research and actually make those devices.” Another participant, Oscar, from Colombia also explained that he wanted “to have (his) own company, that is also one reason why (he) came to this country because it is easier to start a business here than in Colombia.” The current situation in their home country had a strong effect on the participants' feelings, thoughts, and academic and career choices. The concept of leaving a home country that has a lack of resources for conducting research or heavy regulations for starting a business is an important one, therefore, it must be considered for future studies.

This study's findings from six study participants' descriptions of their study abroad decision-making experiences generally reinforce the literature references to the complex factors influencing the decision to study abroad. However, the additional delineation of findings into the decision-making processes described by the study participants offers both deeper and broader perspectives.

Two: Despite the common several obstacles, each participant experienced his/her environment differently.

The literature review demonstrated that several challenges have been found to be common with international undergraduate students: English language difficulties, academic issues, sociocultural/social issues, loneliness, homesickness, and uncertainty about career options (Mak, Brown, and Wadey, 2013; Balin et al., 2016; Bastien, Seifen-Adkins, & Johnson, 2018; Li and Zizzi, 2018). The literature also discussed that international students present unique background characteristics and are not homogeneous groups of individuals (Welikala, 2015; Omar, Mahone, Ngobia, & FitzSimons, 2016; Heng, 2019). Most participants in this study also described their challenges in the following areas:

- English language difficulties
- Social and sociocultural issues
- Insufficient knowledge of the labor market and legal requirements

Another important finding this study brought into view was that the increased length of exposure to English and increased proficiency of English result in ease of communication. In other words, the level of difficulty the participants experienced with speaking in English depended on the level of their familiarity with the language. Although this study supports the finding in the literature review that English proficiency has a greater impact on the socio-cultural and academic domain of adjustment (Smith and Khawaja, 2011; Bastien, Seifen-Adkins, & Johnson, 2018), it also found that previous knowledge of the language made it easier for the participants to adjust. The participants of this study who had begun to practice English long before coming to the U.S. faced fewer challenges with communication. As mentioned, the participant from Spain shared her frustration with expressing herself in English in both academic

and social settings, while the participants from Honduras, Saudi Arabia, and China reported that they did not have any difficulties with the language. Therefore, this study does not necessarily support the studies reported that students from European countries may have fewer challenges because a high percentage of people speak English as a mother tongue or second language (Larson, 2006; Lee, 2007; Rienties et al., 2012).

The literature review emphasized that students require strong guidance and role models when it comes to developing cultural sensitivity and skills in working with people from different backgrounds (Burkhardt & Bennett, 2015; Li and Zizzi, 2018). Lee encouraged institutions to be aware of issues pertaining to international students “as campus administrators and student affairs professionals hold a particular responsibility for creating as welcoming an atmosphere for international students as they do for domestic students” (2007, p.29). People in American culture are thought to be individualistic, meaning independent, self-reliant, and motivated by what is personally good for them. On the other hand, many international students come to the U.S. from China and India, where members of society have a distinctively collective nature (Wang, 2016). Telbis, Helgeson, and Kingsbury (2014) indicated that individualistic and collectivistic cultures may cause “significant obstacles when it comes to a person’s ease of acculturation or assimilation” (p. 332). Furthermore, it is also important for higher education institutions to have cultural awareness to provide explicit teaching and support to international students. Although most participants spoke positively of the various multicultural experiences at this particular university, two participants did not explicitly feel that the on-campus resources included diverse staff members or sensitivity and willingness to accommodate to international students’ needs, cross-cultural communication during programs offered throughout the year, and guidance regarding academic and student affairs. Moreover, four participants found Americans to be very

independent while the rest considered them to be unaffectionate. This range from positive to negative feelings supports the literature's (Astin, 1984; Evivie, 2009; Dalglish, 2005; Welikala, 2015; Heng, 2019) argument that there may be a range of perceptions and views based on international students' backgrounds.

Career development challenges are consequential on the particular job desire and legal status of international students. Three participants hoped that their studies abroad would help them build valuable skills for the job market. Jiang (2018) indicated that it is important for U.S. postsecondary institutions to understand career outcomes of international bachelor's degree recipients that place more emphasis on acquiring foreign work experience to later secure desirable jobs in their home countries. Although there is a multitude of ways of achieving career success back in participants' home countries, the rest of the informants expressed their desire to find their first jobs in the U.S. as a key goal for their professional development and engagement. Based on their feedback, students wished to use the Office of Global Engagement more frequently to process paper documents regarding their legal stay options in America and career development process, including work opportunities and job search assistance. However, that was not always the reality. For example, Oscar expressed that "I believe that the academic advisors could help more international students with employment opportunities for them because sometimes it feels they are more of an obstacle than a helpful hand when it comes to employment opportunities for international students." This finding supports the limited research on the career development of international students in the literature. Balin et al. (2016) in their study on the important practical challenges of pursuing and maintaining opportunities explored a lack of knowledge on work authorization topics among international students, career services professionals, and employers. Since work authorization significantly impacts the career

development of international students, the researchers suggested career services professionals have “a more accurate and complete understanding of the process to facilitate an effective exploration of career possibilities and set realistic career goals” (p. 1055). These findings are in agreement with a previous study of Nunes and Arthur (2013) who stated that students’ lack of work experience and networks as well as citizenship status are other major barriers to employment. As Nilsson & Ripmeester (2016) explored that employment upon graduation is a drive for international students in their choice to study abroad, the participants in this study also came to the U.S. in the hope of having a better future through their education. Therefore, the findings reinforce the literature references.

This study’s findings from six study participants’ descriptions of their study abroad decision-making experiences generally align the literature references to the challenges associated with language skills, cultural differences, academic issues, and career development. However, the additional delineation of findings into the adjustment processes described by the study participants offers both deeper and broader perspectives.

Three: Four elements were indicated as key motivators during the study abroad experience.

Given the personal, social, and determined natures of the participants, four key motivators were revealed during their international learning journey:

- Quality education
- Exposure to the country’s culture, people, and ideas
- Personal independence
- Career development

Quality education was the most referenced study abroad motivator. Exposure to the country's culture, people, and ideas was the second most represented motivating factor for the majority of study participants. Most of the study participants described personal independence among their top three motivating factors. Work experience was the fourth most represented aspiration priority. Additional motivating factors referenced by three or fewer study participants included improving English language skills, having limited home country opportunities, and becoming an American citizen. The four identified study abroad aspirations and motivating factors in the study data share some commonalities with Wu's (2014) study abroad decision factor, push-pull factors noted Lam, Ariffin, and Ahmad (2011), Puntaney's (2016) undergraduates' motivations, and Oliveira and Soares's (2016) model for decision factors. A comparison of key motivators as described by Wu's (2014), Lam, Ariffin, and Ahmad (2011), Puntaney's (2016), and Branco-Oliveira and Soares's (2016) in light of the for motivators identified in the current research is presented in Table 3.

Key Motivators				
Wu (2014)	Lam, Ariffin, & Ahmad (2011)	Puntaney (2016)	Branco Oliveira & Soares (2016)	The present Study (2020)
1. Experience new cultures	1. Academic and research quality of the institution	1. Travel	1. Educational reputation	1. Academic
2. Strengthen English	2. Career development	2. Possibility of earning a high salary	2. Career development	2. Exposure (culture, people, & ideas)
3. Influence future career	3. Tuition & Living Expenses	Exposure (culture, people, & ideas)	3. Tuition & Living Expenses	3. Personal independence
	4. Friendly community	Opportunities within the major	4. Exposure (culture, people, & ideas)	4. Work Experience

Table 3: Key Motivating Factors

As seen, the findings of this study do not completely align with any single theorist. This, once again, explains that international students are not homogenous group, therefore, their personal and educational backgrounds are not necessarily similar to each other. As Dalglish (2005) reported, it is important to provide an effective international learning experience for all international students since international students are accustomed to the educational and cultural practices of their own countries. Moreover, the motivating factors of each participant in the current study as well as previous studies mentioned above also changed, though there was a general agreement on the motivating factors most frequently reported by the participants. Astin (1984), as explained in the literature review, offered to consider different factors to see the full picture. His theory is helpful for the considerations of the three key areas: (a) Outcomes alone are not enough to evaluate educational impact; (b) A single input cannot wholly determine any output measure without environmental considerations; (c) Both (input and outcome factors) are still limited in their usefulness without also being aware of educational environment and experiences.

Kettle's approach that assists the study enables insights into students' favored practices and their actions in response; thereafter they influence the attainment of academic and personal goals. It provides opportunities to understand the way social life gets done by international students as the authorities on the experience within the prevailing social conditions and examine the strategies undertaken by them to process their learning and academic success. Furthermore, it allows a powerful reflection back to educators and administrators and helps them to understand what actually works and what does not work. The present study explored study abroad motivating factors from the broader lens of student development, offering both deeper and broader perspectives into experiences while also exploring the potential benefits of aligning the

new ways of knowing, doing and being that students recognized as valued into the Western education student development formula to engage with institutional expectations.

Four: Staying both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated is advised by the participants for the ideal learning experience in the host country

Intrinsic motivation is an internal form of motivation that is personally rewarding to people. Individuals are intrinsically motivated to engage in an activity because it is internally satisfying or rewarding. For example, personal enjoyment of an activity or a desire to learn a skill is considered an act of intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation represents motivational drivers that focus on external rewards, like getting a raise or studying hard. In most cases, however, the key is to balance both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation against each other. This balance is completely dependent on both individuals and the goals they are trying to achieve (Tarver, 2020).

Participants in this study advised prospective and newly committed students to set a routine and a plan for both study and fun. This balance would help them manage the ups and downs of the international learning experience so that one part of their life in the host country does not dominate the rest of it. They recommended incoming students work hard for academic success (extrinsic motivation) and make friends, involve in community events, and participate in different extracurricular activities, such as music, international student clubs, and sports for internal satisfaction (intrinsic motivation). They can be summarized as follows:

- Socialize
- Have clear objectives
- Work hard
- Be open-minded

Study findings are also consistent within the theoretical framework describing possibly better personal and professional outcomes for international students who “devote considerable energy to studying, spend much time on campus, participate actively in student organizations, and interact frequently with faculty members and other students” (Astin, 1984, p. 518). A considerable number of studies published to date agreed that academic and social engagement have the power to produce greater outcomes (Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Bird, 2017).

Conclusions

Building on the trail of evidence reflected in Chapter 4, the conclusions are presented in context to the research question that framed this study.

Conclusion One: Academic, Social, and Cultural Obstacles of Participants

This section summarizes the common obstacles shared by the participants, though a voice was given to the different perspectives for careful analysis to reflect the fact that international students present unique background characteristics and are not homogeneous groups of individuals (Welikala, 2015; Omar, Mahone, Ngobia, & FitzSimons, 2016; Heng, 2019). Furthermore, this study aligns with the literature review demonstrated that there are several obstacles found to be common with international undergraduate students: English language difficulties, academic issues, sociocultural/social issues, loneliness, homesickness, and uncertainty about career options (Mak, Brown, and Wadey, 2013; Balin et al., 2016; Bastien, Seifen-Adkins, & Johnson, 2018; Li and Zizzi, 2018). Most participants described their challenges in communicating the English language, academic and sociocultural/social issues, and experience with the service quality of the Office of Global Engagement. Half of the participants also mentioned their concern having insufficient knowledge of the labor market and legal requirements.

Academic success and cultural exposure were two of the most important factors for all the study participants. In terms of adjusting to the educational system in the United States and meeting expectations and fulfilling requirements of the University, their instructors contributed a great deal, all the participants reported. However, the analysis showed that the service quality in helping students dealing with academic issues differed on different informants. Two participants called for improvement and provided some recommendations in their comments. Based on their responses, the on-campus resources should include diverse staff members, cross-cultural communication during programs offered throughout the year, and professional assistance and guidance regarding academic and student affairs. Furthermore, each participant described their struggles with learning customary social behaviors and living within a foreign culture. Despite the struggles with cultural values and lifestyles, each of the participants expressed some sense of accomplishment in being able to navigate the culture and succeed at their university.

The study did not find significant relations between academic/social issues and students' demographics. Unlike the studies by Lee, Park, and Kim (2009), Contreras-Aguirre and Gonzalez (2017), and Young and Clark (2017) who reported that demographic characteristics (age, gender, race/ethnicity) have a huge impact on student engagement, this study highlights the important effect of early preparation for college and personality traits of participants confronting with academic challenges as they were adjusting to their new environment. Moreover, the findings contradict the literature in Chapter 2 on psychological issues and their side impact on international student engagement. Wei, Heppner, Mallen, Ku, and Liao, (2007) reported that when students are "faced with a different language, new environment, and new cultural norms, they may quickly experience difficulties in maintaining the same academic performance as before" (p. 391). These difficulties increase their vulnerability to depression as "these

expectations (e.g., improving English proficiency is a slow process) may not be sufficient to meet the demands of reality (e.g., a need to improve English as soon as possible) to function well in everyday life in the U.S.” (p. 391). Although the participants face some emotional problems, their situation did not seem bad enough to use additional resources or counseling services.

All participants hoped that their education would help them to build valuable skills for the job market. Although all the participants needed to be ready for the next steps after graduation, career development issues increased especially for students who wished to find their first jobs in the U.S. as a key goal for their professional development and engagement. They expressed a need for assistance on their legal stay options in America and the career development process, including work opportunities and job search assistance. Therefore, with all these benefits and demands, it certainly indicates that employment upon graduation is a drive for international students in their choice to study abroad and exposes that every student should be provided with sufficient capacity to meet the maximum requirements with the contemporary services in assisting career problems.

Conclusion Two: Academic, social, and cultural resources of participants

Quality education along with academic success was the most referenced study abroad motivator. Most of the participants mentioned that their instructors advised them with regards to information about coursework and the graduation process. Other than this, no further evidence suggests that it had anything else to assist students in the academic aspect. Therefore, when asked their suggestions on the support services, interview participants stated their need for more professional advice, cross-cultural student-instructor- interactions, and guidance in the curriculum. Three informants explained that they did not have extra time to participate in social

activities due to their busy schedule in completing coursework to meet requirements and lack of self-confidence in speaking English (Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Bird, 2017). As mentioned, academic performance plays the most important role in their motivation and engagement perspectives, which support the principal findings of this study in serving international students (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005; Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Wang & BrckaLorenz, 2018). Therefore, the domestic university has the responsibility to provide sufficient academic knowledge of the American education system, curriculum design, and culturally responsive teaching to help students overcome academic difficulties (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Bhowmik & Kim, 2018).

Exposure to the country's culture, people, and ideas was the second most represented motivating factor for the majority of study participants. The qualitative analysis revealed that although most students thought that the social activities held by the Office of Global Engagement office were manifold and helpful, two participants did not explicitly feel that the on-campus resources included diverse staff members or sensitivity and willingness to accommodate to international students' needs, cross-cultural communication during programs offered throughout the year, and guidance regarding academic and student affairs. Furthermore, the majority of participants reported that domestic students usually were not eager to seek commonalities to bridge cultural divides and build relationships with people of other cultures. Therefore, they surrounded themselves with other international students who participated in mutual recognition. It is important to remember that new cultural norms in the host country may increase the number of challenges experienced by international students as they bring their inherited culture of values, beliefs, customs, attitudes, and behaviors with them. For this reason, higher education institutions play an important role in providing opportunities for cross-cultural interactions

defined as a “communication exchange with someone deemed by an interactant to be of a different ethnicity” (Burkhardt & Bennett, 2015). Although discriminatory and racist practices that create physical and emotional distances between both domestic and international students continue to be a fact of life for many students, campus environments are great places because of the potential for frequent interactions among international and domestic students. Institutions must continually develop to foster orientations, offer diversity training where students can talk openly about their feelings, and adopt different programs and services. Lee encouraged institutions to be aware of issues pertaining to international students “as campus administrators and student affairs professionals hold a particular responsibility for creating as welcoming an atmosphere for international students as they do for domestic students” (2007, p.29). He advised educators to consider using multiple discussion formats to allow diverse approaches to voicing opinions as well as institutions to move beyond cultural sensitivity training and enforce strict codes of conduct regarding discriminatory statements and behaviors.

Financial Concerns have not been identified as an obvious negative influence on the international student experience. Most participants were satisfied with the current assistance provided by the Office of Global Engagement and family members. In other words, financial obstacles were at the bottom of their concern list. However, they were still eager to apply scholarships or on-campus work positions to release their family’s financial burden. As the literature pointed out, spending their parents’ hard-earned money makes them feel like a source of burden on their families, resulting in stress or anxiety, which may affect their academic performance and overall satisfaction at a foreign university (Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012). Thus, students who perceived economic supports from their institutions are more likely to have a better study abroad experience.

Career development was one of the most desired outcomes of their international learning experience. Three participants hoped that their studies abroad would help them build valuable skills for the job market back home while the rest of the informants expressed their desire to find their first jobs in the U.S. as a key goal for their professional development and engagement. However, these participants reported concerns with respect to work opportunities and legal paper documents and expressed dissatisfaction with the contemporary services in assisting career problems. Student career expectation plays a strong role in their senses of achievement during their entire study in their institution. These findings are in agreement with a previous study of Nunes and Arthur (2013) who states that students' lack of work experience and networks, as well as citizenship status are major barriers to employment. In their study on the important practical challenges of pursuing and maintaining opportunities, Balin et al., (2016) invited institutions to provide international students with a comprehensive understanding of the career development process. Similarly, Jiang (2018) indicated that U.S. postsecondary institutions must understand career outcomes of international bachelor's degree recipients that place more emphasis on acquiring foreign work experience to later secure desirable jobs in their home countries and the U.S. Thus, the findings of this study are consistent with the previous studies listed in Chapter 2 with regards to assessing student needs in career development, improving the employability skills of international students, and enlightening them about their immigration status in order to prepare them for internships and employment.

Limitations

As a qualitative researcher, I was the primary instrument in this study; that is, I designed the interview protocol, interacted with participants, analyzed the data, and described my subject matter (Colaizzi, 1978; Morrow, Rodriguez, & King, 2015; Suryani, Welch, & Cox, 2016). As a

human instrument, researcher bias – personal thoughts, feelings, opinions, and tastes – presented a concern. In order to minimize this threat, I had participants check the accuracy of my interpretations and explored responses to achieve a depth of understanding (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Creswell, 2009). I also did not solicit students from the education college population, at which I am a graduate assistant. Instead, I sought participants from the university student population. For the international undergraduate student participants, they felt comfortable sharing their personal experiences with me and expected me to be a perfect translator to understand and make conclusions.

Qualitative research is dependent on the language and communication skills of both the participants and the researcher. In other words, “Language is a fundamental tool through which qualitative researchers seek to understand human behavior, social processes, and the cultural meanings that inscribe human behavior” (Hennink, 2008, p.21). This was a particular concern for this study due to the nature of participants, all of whom reported that English was not their first language. In order to minimize this, email interviewing was chosen for this study, which eased discomfort or awkwardness and improved the accuracy of reporting. Moreover, it worked as an essential tool to derive direct quotes and exact words from participants, identify themes, and capture the way they expressed their feelings, which ensured validity (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015). On the other hand, using email for data collection had some disadvantages and challenges. A disadvantage of the email interview was the shorter, concise answers and attrition as some participants were unwilling to continue the exchange. Consequently, another disadvantage of the email interview was the lack of the social cues that would contribute to a full understanding of the participants’ experience. In other words, there was no opportunity to observe and interpret visual cues, tone, hesitation, or silence of the participants. Furthermore, the

restrictions necessary to combat COVID-19 created an obstacle to comprise face-to-face follow-ups. Although some concerns were somewhat mitigated through some written cues, such as bold print, capitalization, punctuation, emoticons, and abbreviations, the researcher was not in a position to capture current conversation interests and emotions and respond in real-time.

In the research location, there were at the time nearly 80 international undergraduate students coming from 24 countries. But my research only recruited six interview participants from six different countries, which may have weakened research findings and applications to some extent. In other words, the data analysis has limitations of the small sample size and low response rate. Therefore, the results of the study would not be representative of all international undergraduate students within the university environment.

Lastly, this study recruited international undergraduate students because as a group they are likely to be more heterogeneous than graduate students, to have arrived at a broad and overarching sense of purpose and to experience more developmental challenges that could impact their adjustment to the US (Burkhardt, 2013). In other words, diverse international undergraduates – as opposed to those of a specific national, racial, or cultural group – were selected in order “to ensure that the conclusions adequately represent the entire range of variation rather than only the typical members or some subset of this range” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 235). Given their younger age, their maturity level also might lead them to face more challenges than graduate international students as well as native undergraduate students. A limitation of this strategy is that by not selecting a more homogenous group of participants, I limited the ability to draw the conclusions that more adequately represented the average members of the population (Maxwell, 2012).

Recommendations

There could be significant benefits in further studying the way social life gets done by international undergraduate students as the authorities on the experience within the prevailing social conditions and examining the strategies undertaken by them to process their learning and academic success. Furthermore, it is likely to allow a powerful reflection back to educators and administrators and helps them to understand what actually works and what does not work. This kind of study could be expanded to include a specific national, racial, or cultural group “to ensure that the conclusions adequately represent the entire range of variation rather than only the typical members or some subset of this range” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 235). An extension could also be accomplished by expanding the study population numbers of participants or institutions.

The findings of a study should allow institutions to design more effective programs that target the needs of specific student groups, as opposed to viewing students as members of larger, less differentiated groups (e.g., international students, domestic students). Therefore, future studies need to recognize the unique background characteristics of individuals (Welikala, 2015; Omar, Mahone, Ngobia, & FitzSimons, 2016; Heng, 2019).

It is also important to consider conducting research that integrates existing research to synthesize or contrast to achieve a more inclusive research perspective. Combining existing research on international students’ perspectives, processes, and experiences with existing or newly developing studies focused on international students’ favored practices and their actions in response to influence the attainment of academic and personal goals could offer both deeper and broader perspectives into experiences while also help to explore the potential benefits of aligning the new ways of knowing, doing and being that students recognized as valuable.

Increasing the retention and persistence of international students in the US learning environment requires collective commitments from all classroom stakeholders, including both the faculty-to-student and student-to-student interactions, to engage and contribute. The study found that many participants had little contact with domestic students because they were reluctant to initiate contact with them on the assumption that host students were reserved and preferred to socialize with each other, and while others challenged themselves to actively engage all classmates, most assumed a more passive role in engaging others outside their concentric circle. Therefore, it is important for further study to recognize or focus on facilitating student development and engagement that heightens the holistic learning environment quality for all individuals. This study also suggests that future research should investigate the strategies that higher education institutions implementing to enhance friendship patterns between domestic and international students. This study identified two specific areas that would benefit from additional research: Specific actions of international students services offices that make sojourners feel the most welcome to campuses in the US and culture-based outreach protocols of institutions that would help improve the ability of these offices to initiate a positive relationship with international students.

Finally, offices of international students services could develop workshops in informing cultivating the career ability by providing strategies related to job searching, successful interviews, and workplace communication. If they wish to return to their home country, they must conduct a long-distance search or delay it until they return home. If they wish to stay in the host country, they will find that the regulations surrounding their ability to work can be confusing. Furthermore, it is also important to provide these students with individualized assistance on their career development needs that is meaningful to them due to specialized

profession requirements. Therefore, this study would also benefit from future studies on the challenges related to international student career services include immigration policy, employers' mindset, and students' expectations as well as tools international students need to obtain employment in the United States, home, or abroad.

Reflexivity

As a researcher, I was able to identify with the six participants in many ways because I was also an international student at an American university in 2011. As a doctoral student, I have been able to apply theoretical lenses to the participants experiences to make more systematic sense of what they were going through. As a practitioner, I am excited about being able to put this new understanding into practice in classrooms while keeping my eyes open to the widely varied experiences and staying energized by collective ability of students to persevere despite challenges in host countries.

The goal of this study was to give a voice to international students on an American campus by examining strategies and resources found helpful by students to provide ways of redressing inequitable practices and contributing to pedagogical change to promote engagement of international undergraduate students. The data collected supports this goal due to the rich, thoughtful, and candid reflections that these six participants shared about their experiences as international students at the research site and in the host country. At each stage of this study I set out to reflect on the course of the study and on the findings as I thought about how I was feeling and how my interactions made me feel. I also thought about how the participants were feeling and what findings surprised me. I also reflected on my interpretations and then questioned myself to see how my biases may have been playing a role in my process of understanding. I will continue to consider my personal thoughts, feelings, and preconceptions while exploring the

widely varied experiences of students in the wake of major trends of globalization of education and internationalization of higher education to factor them all into my work.

Summary

This chapter restates the purpose of this qualitative study while outlining key findings generated by the research study questions, culminating study conclusions, explaining limitations, and highlighting the considerations for further research. The corresponding results generated from the data findings offer pertinent insight into study participant perspectives in four key areas: (a) Multiple factors played an important role for study abroad decision making; (b) Despite the common several obstacles, each participant experienced his/her environment differently; (c) Four elements were indicated as key motivators during the study abroad experience; (d) Staying both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated is advised by the participants for the ideal learning experience in the host country. Conclusions and recommendations reflected in this chapter were generated based on the key findings of participants' descriptions of their perspectives of how they processed their study abroad decision, challenges they had to face, personal goals they wanted to achieve, and wisdom they gleaned from the experience to pass on to prospective and newly committed students.

What emerged from this study deepens the understanding of study abroad journey from the lens and voices of participants. These individuals tried to effectively navigate the processes steeped in the University's norms and expectations and balance the ups and downs of their international learning experience. Participants demonstrated varying degrees of resilience to challenges and innovation in addressing those challenges.

The U.S. is the home to some of the best higher education institutions in the world, attracting international students to study in the country and giving students a chance to study

with some of the world's greatest minds, researchers, business leaders, technologists, philanthropists, innovators, and become the change-makers of tomorrow. However, success in this role relies on a commitment to teaching students to be critical beings in all aspects of life, building upon the knowledge already gained, and considering all stakeholders. The hope is that the findings from this study will contribute to such knowledge and commitment.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Appendix A:
Interview Protocol

I. Introduction

- A. Introduction of Researcher
- B. Purpose of the Study
- C. Ground Rules

The following script will be read by the participant prior to interview:

“I’d like to thank you once again for being willing to participate in the survey and interview aspect of my study. As I have mentioned to you before, my study seeks to gain a clear understanding of the needs and expectations of international undergraduate students in challenging environments and factors that influence academic success, social integration, and acculturation satisfaction. Therefore, it may provide an opportunity for additional services and practices to be implemented or current services to be expanded so that they can gain the highest level of satisfaction possible in the host country. The interview today should last approximately one and a half hours during which you will be asked about your upbringing, demographics, backgrounds, and precollege preparation information; decision to attend college in the U.S.; experiences with academic classes, social integration opportunities, and accumulation process; and opinions that you may have about yourself and your school as well as community. Please provide a response for each question.”

“Please sign the release form. For your information, only the researchers on the project will have access to contact information and responses, which will be eventually destroyed. Please be aware that all information will be held confidential. Your participation is voluntary,

you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and I do not intend to inflict any harm.
Please provide a response for each question. Again, thank you for agreeing to participate.”

“Before you begin to respond to the questions, do you need any clarifications or have any concerns? “If you do or any questions arise at any point in this study, you can feel free to reach out to me at any time. I would be more than happy to answer your questions.”

I. Survey Questions

Q1. Current Age: Please specify your age (in years).

- _____

Q2. Country of origin: Please indicate your home country.

- _____

Q3. Ethnic origin: Please specify your ethnicity.

- White
- Hispanic or Latino
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- From multiple races
- Some other race (please specify): _____

Q4. Gender: Please specify your gender.

- Female
- Male

- Other (specify): _____

Q5. Academic year: Please specify your academic year in school.

- First year (freshman year)
- Second year (sophomore year)
- Third (junior year)
- Final year (senior year)

Q6. Accommodation: Please specify your housing condition.

- On-Campus
- Off-Campus

Q7. Marital Status: Please specify your marital status.

- Single, never married
- Married or domestic partnership
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated

Q8. Employment Status: Please describe your employment status.

- Employed, working 1-39 hours per week
 - On-Campus
 - Off-Campus
- Employed, working 40 or more hours per week

- On campus
- Off campus
- Not employed, looking for work
- Not employed, NOT looking for work
- Disabled, not able to work

Q9. **Language:** Please specify your first language.

- _____

Q10. **Major:** What is your major or intended major?

- _____

Q11. **Academic Progress:** What have most of your grades been up to now at the university?

- A
- A-
- B+
- B
- B-
- C+
- C
- C-
- Lower than C-

II. Interview Questions

1. Life Prior to Migration.

- a. Tell me about your perceptions of life in the U.S. before you migrated.
- b. Tell me about your decision to study in the U.S.
- c. Tell me how your relationships with your family members and friends prior to migration.
- d. Tell me about the financial support and/or scholarship you receive (if applicable).

2) Academic experiences in the U.S.

- a) Tell me about your experiences with your instructors on the transition, preparation for exams, discussion of course materials, projects and assignments, explanation of requirements, and feedback on your academic performance.
- b) Tell me about the assistance that you received from the academic advisors and student services staff in benefiting from using learning support services (writing center, tutoring services, etc.), establishing relationships from different backgrounds, and attending events and social/academic activities.
- c) Tell me about the academic and emotional support you received from domestic and other international students as an international undergraduate student at a university in the U.S.
- d) How do you think your background may have benefited or conflicted with your experience socially, linguistically (English as a second language), academically, and culturally in the U.S.

3) Life experiences in the U.S.

- a. Tell me about your life as an undergraduate student here.

- b. Tell me about an interaction with a person of another culture that helped you adjust.
- c. Tell me about the social/cultural challenges you faced/ are facing in adjusting to life in the U.S. How do you feel about the overall experience?
- d. Tell me about the challenges in everyday life that you did not expect prior to and after migration and the factors helping you successfully meet these challenges.

4) Goal-Setting for Study Abroad Learning Outcomes

- a. Tell me about your personal and professional goals/expectations from your study in the U.S.
- b. Tell me about how your experience and education in the U.S. will help you to achieve your goals.
- c. Tell me about your plans and your progress towards these plans.
 - Any of them seems to be impossible because of your legal status.
- d. Was there ever a time you consider not completing your studies?

5) Creating the ideal international student experience

- a. Please answer the following questions:
 - ◆ Do you think you socialize enough or engage in social groups?
 - If so, how?
 - If you do not, then what are things that you do not feel comfortable with and what you should do to assimilate into the U.S. culture?
- b. Can you give examples of any types of support systems (e.g. family, friends, belief system) or personal coping skills which contributed to your success and persistence as an undergraduate student?

- c. How much emotional and social support are you able to draw through friends here?
- d. What advice would you give to incoming international students about how to overcome cultural, academic, and social challenges and be successful in college?

III. Closure

- a. Concluding questions:
 - What should I have asked you that I did not ask that would help me better understand your personal experience?
 - Is there anything else that you would want to add that has not been covered in the interview so far?
- b. Feedback

Appendix B : Consent to Participate in a Research Study



DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY

600 FORBES AVENUE ♦ PITTSBURGH, PA 15282

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE:

Listening to the Voices of International Undergraduates Regarding their Perceptions of Engagement and their Strategies to Achieve Academic Success

INVESTIGATOR:

Gulcan Tokluoglu, MBA
Department of Foundations and Leadership
tokluoglug@duq.edu

ADVISOR:

Rick McCown, Ph.D.
Professor and Pierre Schouver Endowed Chair School of Education
School of Education
Department of Educational Foundations & Leadership
412.396.5856
mccown@duq.edu

SOURCE OF SUPPORT:

This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in Department of Foundations and Leadership at Duquesne University. This study is not receiving any financial support.

PURPOSE:

This study seeks to have profound insight into or deep understanding of experiences of international undergraduate students from their individual perspectives about integrating into a new academic and social setting while navigating the cultural, social, and academic transition process in the U.S. The aim of this research is to provide a clear understanding of the needs and expectations of international undergraduate students so that they can gain the highest level of satisfaction possible in the host country. As a participant, you will be asked to participate in an individual e-mail interviewing study for approximately one and a half hours. You will be asked to describe your upbringing, demographics, backgrounds, and precollege preparation information; decision to attend college in the U.S.; experiences with academic classes, social integration opportunities, and accumulation process; and opinions that you may have about

yourself and your school as well as community. In addition, you may be asked to review the student investigator's analysis of your interview for accuracy and clarity.

In order to qualify for participation, you must:

- be an international student in an undergraduate program in the U.S.
- not have less than 6 months of experience of living and studying in the country
- not speak English as your first language

PARTICIPANT PROCEDURES:

If you provide your consent to participate, you will be asked to respond to the questions that have been divided into two categories outlining the following broad categories under investigation: Entry-characteristics of demographics, life prior to migration, and individual experiences about academic and social involvement, financial, environmental factors, and personal development as an international undergraduate student at a private university in the U.S., as well as relationships with family members, faculty and staff members, classmates, and community members.

This qualitative study will require you to engage in an email interviewing with the researcher. It should last approximately one and a half hours. For your information, only researchers on the project will be privy to the responses which will be eventually destroyed.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:

For the purpose of this study, you will be asked to discuss current, recall past, and project future experiences. However, there are no greater risks associated with participation in this study than the risks of normal daily living. Standard means will be taken to protect confidentiality as best as possible, and no information will be used to identify your involvement in this study.

While you may not directly benefit from the study, your participation in this research may help future international students in terms of appropriate preparation and support.

COMPENSATION:

There will be no compensation for participating in this study. There is also no cost for you to participate in this research project.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your participation in this study, and any identifiable personal information you provide, will be kept confidential to every extent possible, and will be destroyed five years following the completion of the research. Your name will never appear on any survey or research instruments. All written and electronic forms and study materials will be kept secure and the researcher is the only person who will have access to the documents, computer, and the computer password. They will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:

Your participation in the research is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time and with no repercussions. Your participation in this research may also be terminated at any time if it is in your best interest.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

A summary of the results of this study will be provided to at no cost. You may request this summary by contacting the researcher(s) and requesting it. The information provided to you will not be your individual responses, but rather a summary of what was discovered during the research project as a whole.

FUTURE USE OF DATA:

Any information collected that can identify you will not be used for future research studies, nor will it be provided to other researchers.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT:

I have read this informed consent form and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, for any reason without any consequences. Based on this, I certify I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that if I have any questions about my participation in this study, I may contact the researcher, Gulcan Tokluoglu at tokluoglug@duq.edu or by phone at 412.580.0487; Dr. Rick McCown, Duquesne University Advisor, mccown@duq.edu or by phone at 412.396.5856; or, Chair of the Duquesne University Department of Foundations and Leadership, Dr. Gretchen Givens Generett, at generettg@duq.edu or by phone at 412.396.1890. If I have any questions regarding my rights and protections as a subject in this study, I can contact Dr. David Delmonico, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at 412.396.1886 or at irb@duq.edu.

**This project has been approved/verified by
Duquesne University's Institutional Review Board.**

Proceeding to the next page indicates your voluntary consent to participate in this project.

- Anticipated circumstances under which the subject's participation may be terminated by the investigator without regard to the subject's or the legally authorized representative's consent;

- The consequences of a subject's decision to withdraw from the research and procedures for orderly termination of participation by the subject;
- A statement that significant new findings developed during the course of the research that may relate to the subject's willingness to continue participation will be provided to the subject;

Appendix C: Recruitment Letter

DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY

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Recruitment Letter

Dear International Undergraduate Student,

My name is Gulcan Tokluoglu, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Ed.D. Educational Leadership program at Duquesne University. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study about “Examining voice of international undergraduate students as the authorities on the experience of engagement and identifying the strategies undertaken by them to process their academic success.” My study seeks to gain a clear understanding of the needs and expectations of international undergraduate students in challenging environments and factors that influence academic success, social integration, and acculturation satisfaction. Therefore, it may better inform incoming international undergraduate students on the challenges current students face and strategies used by them to overcome these challenges. As an international undergraduate student in the U.S., you are being asked to participate, because your experience is of value to this study.

This qualitative study will require each of the participants to engage in an email-interviewing with the researcher. It should last approximately one and a half hours. For your information, only researchers on the project will be privy to the responses which will be eventually destroyed. Please be aware that all information will be held confidential, your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and I do not intend to inflict any harm.

If you are interested in volunteering to participate in this study or if you have any questions, I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to further discuss the research with you. You can reach me at tokluoglug@duq.edu. You may also reach my dissertation committee chair, Dr. Rick McCown, at 412-396-5856 or by email at mccown@duq.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Gulcan Tokluoglu, M.B.A.

Doctoral Candidate, Department of Foundations and Leadership,
Duquesne University